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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

THE FUR TRADE OF FORT CHIPEWYAN  
ON LAKE ATHABASKA, 1778-1835

by



James McPherson Parker

A THESIS  
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE  
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DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled THE FUR TRADE OF FORT CHIPEWYAN AT LAKE ATHABASKA, 1778-1835. Submitted by JAMES MCPHERSON PARKER in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.



## ABSTRACT

This study examines the establishment of the fur trade at Lake Athabaska with Fort Chipewyan as its focus. It covers the period from the entry of Peter Pond in 1778 to 1835 when the conflict between the North West and Hudson's Bay Companies, 1815-1821, was no longer disrupting the trade. During this period monopoly alternated with competition and the pace of fur trade life was geared to these conditions.

Although every endeavour has been made to give as complete a picture as possible of the fur trade of one major fort, to complete the description, references are made to well-known books on the fur trade in general. The study attempts to show the life of a fort as it was related to the fur trade of a district. Since the thesis covers a North West Company and Hudson's Bay Company period, some difficulty was encountered with documents. For the period prior to 1821 no succession of Fort Chipewyan records exists. By making use of the existing North West documents, and with the assistance of Hudson's Bay Company records (it is acknowledged that these are accounts of a rival) the pre-1821 years at Fort Chipewyan and Lake Athabaska are described. There is no attempt to give a chronology of fort events; instead, a topical study is presented.

The first topic dealt with, after the physical description is given, is the attempt of the European traders to reach the Athabaska country. The search for a suitable route is discussed because, once it was found, there was a corresponding need for a new depot before any further expansion of the trade could be undertaken. The development of the



trade in the Athabaska district is also outlined. This introduction shows that, in the effort to set up an Athabaska rendezvous, the traders encountered problems of location and transportation.

The thesis next discusses the solution of these problems. The work of the men, their daily routine and comforts, is described in a separate chapter. The study also endeavours, in discussing relations and trade with the Indians, to show the inter-relationship of Indian and white culture.

Finally the place of Fort Chipewyan in the trade is presented. Because the pre-1821 documents only give accounts of the Athabaska trade, the importance of Fort Chipewyan is deduced from an examination of the Athabaska district statistics. After 1821 the problems of recuperating from the competition are presented.

The value of fur packs, which is important in assessing the value of the trade at Fort Chipewyan, is outlined in Appendix A.

Appendix B has pictures of the Fort Chipewyan area, and also included is Mr. Victor Mercredi's sketch of the fort which was rebuilt in the 1870s by Chief Factor Roderick MacFarlane.





## PREFACE

Fort Chipewyan, the first European settlement in Alberta, was ideally situated for the fur trade. Located at the hub of a drainage system, the fort was reached from the south by the Athabaska River. The streams running to the north and to the west became highways for expansion of the trade. Lake Athabaska penetrates the land west of Hudson Bay. As a base for extension of the trade, Fort Chipewyan ranked second in importance to Fort William on Lake Superior. Not only the fur trade benefited from the establishment of Fort Chipewyan. As the "Grand Magazine of the North" it became the base of operations for land explorers. Alexander Mackenzie, John Franklin, George Back, and John Richardson were a few of the men who gained fame after passing through its gates.

Fort Chipewyan, headquarters of both the North West Company's and Hudson's Bay Company's Athabaska enterprises, offers an opportunity to examine the fur trade prior to and after 1821. Although documents are lacking for the North West period, there are sufficient records to indicate the conditions of the trade.

Masson's volumes are particularly helpful. They contain the Reminiscences of Roderick Mackenzie, James Mackenzie's 1799-1800 journal at Fort Chipewyan, Wentzell's Letters to Roderick Mackenzie, all of which provide considerable information on the early history of the Athabaska district. Philip Turnor's journal of his Lake Athabaska expedition in 1790-1792, published by the Champlain Society, has some excellent information on the North West Company's organization and trading methods. Peter Fidler's Nottingham House Journals (1802-1806) provide a description



of the conflict between the Canadian companies. There are no accounts of the 1806-1814 years at Fort Chipewyan. Nevertheless, the Minutes of the North West Company in the Champlain Society volume edited by W. S. Wallace indicate the difficulties the Athabaska trade was experiencing. The letters of Ferdinand Wentzell also give an idea of conditions in the Athabaska prior to and during the 1815-1821 struggle. The Selkirk Papers in the Public Archives contain journals and papers captured at Fort William in 1816. The John McLeod and C. N. Bell collection have some Fort Chipewyan letters. The North West Company Papers in the Hudson's Bay Company Archives have some Fort Chipewyan letters. The Hudson's Bay Company Archives also provide detailed records of the fort after 1821.

The study was extended to 1835 partly because several of the above-mentioned explorers' narratives could be used. Furthermore, by 1835 the fur trade had recovered from the damaging effects of competition.

Fort Chipewyan is now largely isolated from the mainstream of Canadian society. Until a year ago the bush plane was the most reliable means of contact with the outside world. With the decline of the fur trade as a major industry, Fort Chipewyan stands forgotten and neglected by the rush of today's society. As a producer of furs, however, Fort Chipewyan still ranks as one of the most important trading posts. Its isolation nevertheless permits one to recapture the atmosphere of more hectic scenes. The proud descendants of the traders carry on in the traditions of their forefathers. The experience of a one-year residence in Fort Chipewyan and a canoe journey from Fort McMurray to Fort Chipewyan have proved of great benefit in the writing of this thesis.



I wish to express my thanks to the Governor and Committee of the Hudson's Bay Company in London for their kind permission to use the microfilm records at the Public Archives in Ottawa, and to consult the North West Papers for information relevant to the thesis. I am indebted to Mr. Eric Holmgren, Librarian of the Alberta Provincial Library, for permission to use its Fort Chipewyan journals. I wish further to thank the administrators of the John S. Ewart Memorial Fund for a grant which made my research in Ottawa possible.

My thanks go to the people of Fort Chipewyan, especially Messrs. Roderick Fraser, Paul Kelpin, Frank Ladouceur, Noel Mackay, Victor Mercredi, Horace Wylie, and Lawrence Yanik, whose friendships and assistance during my year at Fort Chipewyan led to a better understanding of my subject.

I also extend my thanks to Professor W. J. Eccles, now of the University of Toronto, who recommended this topic to me.

Finally, I express my deepest appreciation to Professor L. G. Thomas of the University of Alberta for his valuable counsel and encouragement in the development of this thesis.





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## INTRODUCTION

During the last two decades of the eighteenth century, the fur trade reached the Athabaska country. The "Athabaska" was first used to describe the land drained by waters flowing into the Arctic Ocean, i.e., the Mackenzie River basin. The North West Company in 1802 set its boundaries fifty-five degrees North latitude to sixty-six degrees North latitude and 110 degrees West longitude to 120 degrees West longitude.<sup>1</sup> The north-eastern corner crossed the Burnside River near the mouth of the Cracroft River, District of Mackenzie; the southeastern corner fixed upon Primrose Lake, Saskatchewan (due north of Cold Lake, Alberta). The northwestern corner was Great Bear Lake, District of Mackenzie, and the southwestern corner was a few miles west of Beaverlodge, Alberta. The district included the Peace River, Athabaska River, Slave River, and Mackenzie River systems.<sup>2</sup>

The permanent establishment of a post here marked a deep penetration into the far northwest. Founded in 1788, Fort Chipewyan, on Lake Athabaska, still functions as a fur trade post although its importance has declined from the days when Alexander Mackenzie termed it the "Emporium of the North". In 1791, while surveying Lake Athabaska for the Hudson's Bay Company, Philip Turnor described the fort as being "the compleatest Inland

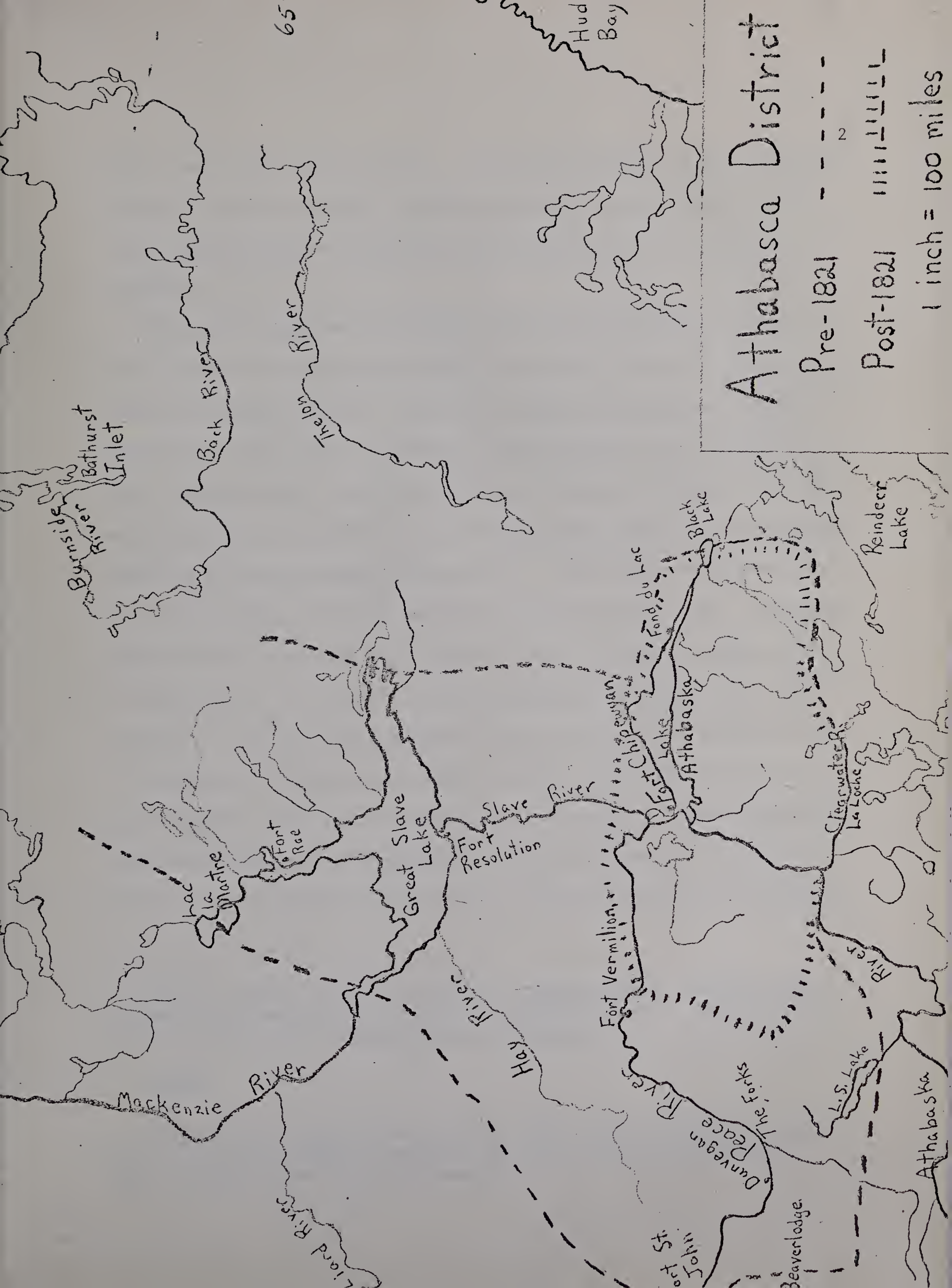
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<sup>1</sup>Davidson, Gordon C., The North West Company, University of California Press, Berkley, 1918, Appendix J, p. 280.

<sup>2</sup>Mackenzie River became a separate district in 1823. Cf. Minutes of Council Northern Department of Rupert Land, 1821-1831, R. Harvey Fleming (ed.), The Hudson's Bay Record Society, London, 1940, p. 44. Hereafter referred to as R. Fleming (ed.), Minutes of Northern Council.







# Athabasca District

Pre-1821

----- 2

Post-1821

|||||

1 inch = 100 miles



House I have seen in the country ... the Grand Magazine of the Athapiscow Country."<sup>3</sup> With a two years' supply of goods in store, the fort held a commanding position as entrepôt in the expanding fur trade of the Athabaska.<sup>4</sup>

Today, Fort Chipewyan has fallen victim to the passage of time. The last of the old buildings, the former residence of the chief factor, was torn down in August, 1964. One can only wander along fading footpaths between the still visible outlines of buildings which were removed in 1939. The main path leads from the site of the old buildings across the outline of the east stockade up to the high rocky point where the lookout tower and the powder magazine once stood.<sup>5</sup> Here stands the base of the fort sundial which faithfully marked the time until the 1940s. Southeast across the lake where willows fringe the shore, can be seen the outline of Goose Island. The island, lying in shallow, reed-choked water near the mouth of the silt-laden Athabaska River, has lost its importance as a fort fishery. Beyond Goose Island, Old Fort Point, the first site of Fort Chipewyan, can be distinguished on clear days. A mirage frequently forms and magnifies the proportions of both the island and the point. Two miles to the southwest of 'the rock' are the entrances to the Rocher

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<sup>3</sup>Hearne, Samuel and Turnor, Philip, Journals, J. B. Tyrrell, (ed.), Toronto, The Champlain Society, 1934, p. 398. Hereafter referred to as J. B. Tyrrell, (ed.), Hearne and Turnor Journals.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>This point is known simply as 'the rock' in Fort Chipewyan. On a visit to the local Hudson's Bay post one often hears the question, "Have you been up to 'the rock' today?"





River and the Quatre Fourches. Between them lies English Island where Peter Fidler failed in his attempt to establish a permanent post for the Hudson's Bay Company. Looking directly west, Dog Head, a massive hill of granite, juts into the lake. About a mile away, nothing remains of the XY Company's post on Little Island, a piece of rock separated by only a few feet of water from Mission Point, called locally "Colin Fraser's Point". One mile south of 'the rock', across the channel of water leading out of the lake, sits Potato (formerly Coal) Island, whose sombre, spruce-covered hills scarcely give a hint that they once harboured Fort Wedderburn, witness to the final struggle between the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company.

The land around Fort Chipewyan today has changed little since the coming of the white man. Its ruggedness and solitude are strong reminders of the days when Fort Chipewyan was the emporium of the district which Professor Rich terms "the Eldorado of the north-west".<sup>6</sup>

The fur trade expanded towards the far northwest from its bases on Hudson Bay and the St. Lawrence-Great Lakes system. When the Montrealers reached the Saskatchewan and Churchill rivers in the 1760s, they precipitated a clash between two competing economies. There the pedlars from Quebec were able to intercept the Indians carrying furs intended for trade with the Hudson's Bay Company's posts on the Bay. The intervention of the Montreal traders upset a well-developed system of inland trade

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<sup>6</sup>Rich, Edwin E., The History of the Hudson's Bay Company, 1670-1870, McLelland & Stewart, Toronto, 1960, vol. 2, p. 209. Hereafter referred to as E. Rich, History.





which extended through Chipewyan and Cree middlemen to the Athabaska, Dogrib, and Copper Indians of the far northwest.<sup>7</sup> This method of trade dated back to 1691 when Henry Kelsey journeyed inland to bring the Indians and their furs down to Hudson Bay. The northern Indians were introduced into this trade system in the early eighteenth century when James Knight sent William Stewart and Richard Norton inland from Churchill.<sup>8</sup> Although the Hudson's Bay Company did not establish permanent inland posts until after the Montrealers began to intercept the Indian brigades, it is worth noting that the Northern Indian in all likelihood received his first taste of the fruits of European culture through the Bay.

During the 1770s it became increasingly clear to the pedlars that the country north of the Saskatchewan harboured a vast potential in furs. In 1771 and 1772 Thomas Corry, first of the "pedlars" from Quebec, intercepted Indian brigades on the Saskatchewan.<sup>9</sup> His retirement after two successful seasons of trade was probably an incentive to the traders who followed his trail in 1773. The Frobisher brothers, with the aid of Louis Primeau, were instrumental in making the first approach to the

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<sup>7</sup> Morton, A. S., A History of the Canadian West to 1870-1871, Thomas Nelson & Sons Ltd., Toronto, n.d., p. 12. Hereafter referred to as A. S. Morton, History. Innis, Harold A., The Fur Trade in Canada, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1962, p. 149. Hereafter referred to as H. Innis, The Fur Trade.

<sup>8</sup> E. Rich, History, vol. 1, pp. 435-436.

<sup>9</sup> Wallace, W. S., The Pedlars from Quebec, The Ryerson Press, Toronto, 1954, p. 9.



Athabaska. Primeau undoubtedly supplied information regarding the Churchill River, since he apparently wintered along this system for the Hudson's Bay Company in 1766-1767.<sup>10</sup> Thomas Frobisher wintered on Ile-a-là-Crosse Lake in 1775-1776.<sup>11</sup> The success of the Frobishers, especially in intercepting the trade to the Bay, stood as a testimonial to the existence of a rich source of furs in the upper Churchill country and the unexplored regions beyond Ile-a-là-Crosse.<sup>12</sup> The success of the Quebec traders may be attributed to their offering goods at lower prices and in greater quantity than the organization of Indian middlemen who extorted unreasonably high prices from their fellow Indians of the far northwest.<sup>13</sup>

When the Frobisher brothers retired from the interior with their fortunes, the redoubtable Peter Pond, who had been on the Saskatchewan since 1775, formed a 'concern' with six other pedlars at Sturgeon Fort in 1778.

Seven fur-traders ... he considered far too many to be living at one trading establishment; and he believed ... that he could realize a larger profit if he and the men employed by

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<sup>10</sup>A. S. Morton, History, p. 275.

<sup>11</sup>W. S. Wallace, op. cit., p. 15.

<sup>12</sup>Frobisher is reported to have cleared over £9,000 in his fifth year in the interior. Morton, History, p. 319.

<sup>13</sup>Hearne, Samuel, A Journey from Prince of Wales's Fort in Hudson's Bay to the Northern Ocean, 1769, 1770, 1771 and 1772. Richard Glover (ed.), The MacMillan Company, Toronto, 1958, p. 114. Hereafter referred to as R. Glover (ed.), Hearne's Journey.



him alone could reach the centre of the Chipewyan country at or near Lake Athabaska.<sup>14</sup>

With the five canoes provided by the partnership Pond made his approach through the Churchill River system, over the Portage La Loche (Methy Portage) separating the Hudson Bay and Arctic drainage basins, down the Clearwater River to the Athabaska River, where, on a point some forty miles south of Lake Athabaska, he spent the winter of 1778-1779 trading furs.

Before Pond reached the Athabaska Moses Norton, Governor of Churchill Fort, gave evidence of the Hudson's Bay Company's concern with the threat to the Athabaska by sending Joseph Hansom inland along the Churchill River to rally the Indians to the Bay posts. When Hansom returned with the Indian brigades in 1774, they were intercepted at Frog Portage (Portage de Traite) by Joseph Frobisher.<sup>15</sup> Although Samuel Hearne reported in 1777 that his policy of dispatching Indians to trade in the Athabaska country had increased the yield at Churchill to 11,000 made beaver from an annual average of 6,000,<sup>16</sup> the results of the attempts to regain the Athabaska trade at Cumberland House, the first inland post of the Hudson's Bay Company on the Saskatchewan, were discouraging.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>J. B. Tyrrell (ed.), Hearne and Turnor Journals, p. 56.

<sup>15</sup>A. S. Morton, History, pp. 289-290.

<sup>16</sup>David Thompson's Narrative, Richard Glover (ed.), The Champlain Society, Toronto, 1962, p. xvii. Hereafter referred to R. Glover (ed.), Thompson's Narrative.

<sup>17</sup>E. Rich, History, vol. 2, p. 73.





Handicapped by the lack of men, canoes, and trade goods, the Company was unable to take the initiative in the interior.<sup>18</sup> The Montrealers held a dominant position in the trade of the 1780s.

A series of disasters struck the Hudson's Bay Company in the early 1780s. Smallpox, apparently carried from the Mississippi country by the Snake Indians, ravaged the entire Indian population in 1781. The fur trade to the northwest was severely affected. The War of American Independence reached into Hudson Bay with the devastating sea-attacks of the French under Laperouse on York and Churchill forts. The trade at Churchill was ruined. Mattonabee, leader of the Northern Indians, committed suicide in despair over the capture of his English friends. These disasters, coupled with Pond's expedition, stalled plans for an immediate expansion into the Athabaska.

The expeditions of Peter Pond to the Athabaska in 1780, 1781 and 1783, led him to formulate the idea of exploring north from the Athabaska in hopes of reaching the Pacific Ocean.<sup>19</sup> His idea was a result of the recent discovery of an inlet (Cook's Inlet) by James Cook on the northwest coast of America. Cook believed that his inlet was the mouth of a large river from the interior. Pond in 1785 petitioned Lieutenant-Governor Hamilton of Lower Canada for government support of an expedition to seek the way to the Pacific Ocean; his petition also included a

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<sup>18</sup>R. Glover (ed.), Hearne's Journey, pp. xx-xxii.

<sup>19</sup>Innis, Harold A., Peter Pond, Fur Trader and Adventurer, Irwin & Gordon Ltd., Toronto, 1930, pp. 122-131. Hereafter referred to as H. Innis, Peter Pond.





request for a monopoly on his route to the Athabaska and the fur trade of that region.<sup>20</sup> Although the government was impressed by Pond's ideas, no official privileges were given to the fur trader-explorer, nor did the recently-formed North West Company gain any official support for their projects.<sup>21</sup>

Since Pond's initial Athabaska enterprise yielded him at least 8,000 made beaver, other pedlars were quick to enter the country. The approach to the Athabaska in the 1780s was marked by strife and bloodshed. In 1782, Jean Etienne Waden was killed at Lac La Ronge in a trading dispute with Peter Pond. Acquitted of this murder in Montreal, Pond became implicated in the violent death of John Ross in the Athabaska country in 1787.<sup>22</sup> These tragedies seemed to have a sobering effect on the Montrealers. The principal trading concerns made an agreement in the same year to form a greater North West Company.<sup>23</sup>

That the Montrealers had not yet resolved the problem of an approach to the Athabaska country is evident from Alexander Mackenzie's observation of 1788:

It is difficult to say what can be done in time to come in this country, but, as far as can be judged from present appearances, there will be no possibility of establishing a fort there to advantage, nor could the produce come out the same year.

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<sup>20</sup>Report of the Public Archives, 1890, Ottawa, 1891, p. 52.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., pp. 48, 50.

<sup>22</sup>W. S. Wallace, op. cit., p. 24.

<sup>23</sup>Davidson, Gordon C., The North West Company, University of California Press, Berkley, 1919, pp. 14-15.



I am certain, if the Chipewians could be drawn away from there, the other nations would draw near, and if a rendez-vous could be established, an advantageous trade would be carried on....<sup>24</sup>

Although Mackenzie was referring to the discouraging prospects for trade on Great Slave Lake, the necessity for a "rendez-vous" was clear to him by the summer of 1788. The possibility of the existence of a river which would provide a route to the Pacific Ocean was foremost in Mackenzie's thoughts. The exploration which he determined upon was only practicable if there could be a base of operations in the Athabaska. Any exploratory venture would then be shortened by having an outfit of provisions and supplies in the far northwest. The base would naturally also serve as his proposed "rendez-vous" for the Athabaska Indians. Roderick Mackenzie describes the outcome:

He then informed me, in confidence, that he had determined on undertaking a voyage of discovery the ensuing spring by the water communications reported to lead from Slave Lake to the Northern Ocean, adding that if I could not return and take charge of his department in his absence, he must abandon his intention.... I, without hesitation, accompanied him into Athabaska....<sup>25</sup>

In the fall of that year, Roderick Mackenzie established Fort Chipewyan on Lake Athabaska.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Letter from Alexander Mackenzie to agents of the North West Company, dated February 1, 1788, at Ile-a-la-Crosse, "Reminiscences" by Roderick Mackenzie in Masson, L. R. Les Bougeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest, Quebec, 1889, vol. 1, p. 24. Hereafter referred to as L. Masson, op. cit., R. Mackenzie's Reminiscences.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.



The formidable threat of a united opposition based in Montreal had not gone unheeded by the London Adventurers. The Hudson's Bay Company had sufficiently recuperated its losses by 1789 to plan at least two expeditions to the Athabaska. An exploring party under Charles Duncan was to search for an approach by sea through Chesterfield Inlet and Wager Bay. This project ended in failure with an unfit vessel facing ice conditions and a closed coastline.<sup>27</sup> A second expedition was directed to follow the Canadians' approach from Cumberland House on the Saskatchewan. The leadership of this party was assumed by Philip Turnor, the first full-time surveyor of the Company. Turnor, accompanied by Malchom Ross and Peter Fidler, began to survey the route inland from Cumberland, more or less following a North West brigade under Patrick Small to Ile-a-la-Crosse, where both parties wintered in 1790-1791. Turnor was handicapped by a lack of provision posts en route; his party was obliged to live off the land. Turnor meant to travel over Methy Portage, but, warned by North West brigade of the lack of provisions at the Portage, he decided, on the advice of his Chipewyan guides, to travel from the Methy River up Garson River to Garson Lake. Thence, his party travelled down the rapid-strewn Christina River to the Clearwater, near its junction with the Athabaska.<sup>28</sup> Turnor's survey of Lake Athabaska and the Slave River, his stay near the Northwesters at Fort Chipewyan, and Peter Fidler's winter travels with the Chipewyans on Great Slave Lake contributed immensely to the London Committee's knowledge of the Athabaska country.

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<sup>27</sup>E. Rich, History, vol. 2, p. 132.

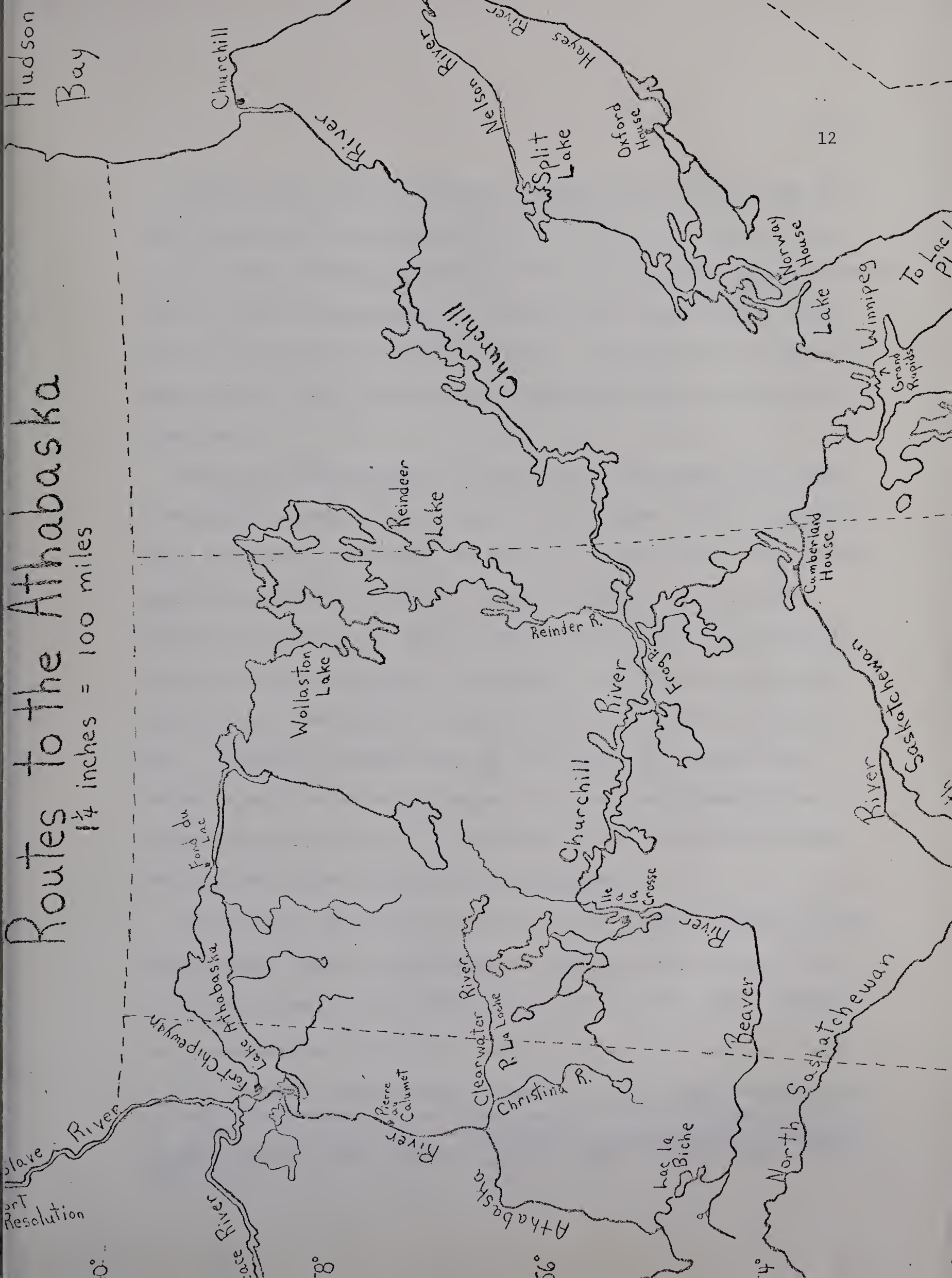
<sup>28</sup>R. Glover (ed.), Hearne's Journey, pp. 371-376.





# Routes to the Athabaska

1 1/4 inches = 100 miles







Philip Turnor left the Athabaska convinced that the only hope for a shorter approach was from Churchill Fort to the east end of the lake. In 1792, Turnor explored the Nelson River up to the mouth of the Burntwood River. There he learned from the Indians that a small portage crossed from the Burntwood to the Churchill River. Turnor departed by ship the same year for London where he set his information and views before the Committee.

While the representatives of the Hudson's Bay Company still sought a satisfactory route to the riches of the Athabaska, Roderick Mackenzie's newly established post became the point of departure for a still deeper penetration into the interior of northwest America. To Alexander Mackenzie the fort was a base of operations from which he travelled to the Arctic Ocean in 1789 and to the Pacific in 1793. His explorations would not have been possible without the supplies provided by the new fort. Mackenzie's journeys were the forerunners of the North West Company's exploitation of the Peace River area, the Mackenzie River system, and New Caledonia.<sup>29</sup> The advance of the fur trade into these new frontier regions centered on Fort Chipewyan.

Strategically situated in the heart of a new field abundant in furs, the fort soon became a distribution and communications center for the North West Company. Fort Chipewyan's role in the North West Company's

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<sup>29</sup>A. G. Morice describes New Caledonia as being "that immense tract of land lying between the Coast Range and the Rocky Mountains, from 51° 30' to 50° of latitude north." The History of the Interior of British Columbia (formerly New Caledonia), 1660 to 1880, William Briggs, Toronto, 1905, p. 1.



organization remained of primary importance until the amalgamation of 1821. Up to that time the fur brigades coming inland stopped at Fort Chipewyan in the autumn to sort and re-pack the goods for their designated districts. In the spring season, the brigades from the Peace, Mackenzie and New Caledonia districts made rendezvous at the fort. There the furs were packed into the canoes which made up Athabaska brigade. The fur cargo was transported outward to be exchanged for the next season's outfit of goods. The brigades necessarily employed a considerable number of men for service as voyageurs. This extra complement of men was kept at Fort Chipewyan throughout the winter season. Reports of the activities of the posts to the west and north came in during the winter season. The significant happenings of the district were recorded in the annual winter express, the first of which left Fort Chipewyan in October of 1798 for Sault Ste. Marie.<sup>30</sup> A senior trader superintended the activities of the post and district. In fact there were often two or three senior partners in residence, especially during the years of competition.

With the coming and going of the brigades and the large number of employees usually kept at the fort, a reliable source of provisions was indispensable. The fisheries normally yielded a steady supply of whitefish and northern pike. These fisheries often meant food or famine in the life of the fort, and had they ever failed permanently, the continued existence of Fort Chipewyan would have been very much in doubt. The

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<sup>30</sup>H. Innis, The Fur Trade, p. 245.



Athabaska delta, low, flat and marshy, was a haven for ducks, geese, and swans, which supplemented the daily ration of fish. Moose, deer, and buffalo, although less than plentiful, gave occasional variety to the menu. Fresh rations of fish and meat, however, were not the provisions which sustained the human engines of the brigades making the long annual voyage from the Athabaska. In the short season of open water, these brigades had not time to collect provisions by fishing and hunting as they travelled; great quantities of dried meat and pemmican were required to assure the success of the brigades in reaching their destination. These dried provisions were collected at Fort Chipewyan from the Athabaska and Peace River regions in preparation for the outward journey.

The North West Company's achievements in the Athabaska were recorded by Philip Turnor. He felt that the Company would not make any great gains until the Canadians' methods were adopted.<sup>31</sup> While the Northwesters seemed to proceed from success to success in the Athabaska, the Company on the Bay faced a number of urgent problems in the early 1790s. There was a need to expand up the Saskatchewan; there was the encroachment of the Montrealers in the "Muskrat Country"; trade was declining at Churchill; the approach to the Athabaska was still uncertain.<sup>32</sup> For an effective solution to these problems the Hudson's Bay Company required not only more manpower, but an undivided leadership; both of these were lacking in the 1790s. In 1793 the outbreak of war in Europe caused a manpower shortage

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<sup>31</sup>E. Rich, History, vol. 2, p. 140.

<sup>32</sup>R. Glover (ed.), Thompson's Narrative, p. xx.







which seriously affected the Company's trade in America for the next twenty years.<sup>33</sup> The conflict of views between Joseph Colen at York and William Tomison at Cumberland weakened Hudson's Bay Company's organization in North America.<sup>34</sup> Tomison did not accept Turnor's opinion that the Athabaska was the center of the opposition; he was intent on organizing a profitable trade on the Saskatchewan.<sup>35</sup> Colen seemed more concerned with rebuilding York's trade in the hinterland of the Bay.<sup>36</sup> The activities of the North West Company began seriously to diminish the English company's returns in this region. William McGillivray's opposition from 1787 to 1790 in the vicinity of Reindeer Lake was particularly effective.<sup>37</sup>

Convinced by Turnor of the importance of an Athabaska expedition, the Committee appointed Malcolm Ross "Master to the Northward" in 1793.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. xxi.

<sup>34</sup>E. Rich, vol. 2, pp. 142-143.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 144.

<sup>36</sup>Professors Rich and Glover differ in their interpretation of Colen's views. Rich states that Colen's chief concern was York and its trade while Glover says that Colen wanted to enter the Athabaska through setting up trading posts on the way. Cf., Rich, History, vol. 2, pp. 142-154, and Glover, Thompson's Narrative, pp. xxvii-xxxix.

<sup>37</sup>E. Rich, History, vol. 2, p. 145.

<sup>38</sup>An excellent account of Ross is given in J. B. Tyrrell's Hearne and Turnor Journals, Appendix C, pp. 598 ff. His first name is spelled Malchom by Tyrrell and Rich, but I have followed Glover, who maintains that the normal spelling of his name in the journals was Malcolm. Cf., Glover, Hearne's Journey, p. xviii.



Ross, who had accompanied Turnor on his Athabaska survey, also believed there was a shorter route to the Athabaska than that through Cumberland House. The journey to the Athabaska by way of Cumberland House on the Saskatchewan involved an extra thousand miles from York and Churchill on the Bay. A short cut could give the Bay men a chance to reach the Athabaska before their rivals each season, a distinct advantage in equipping the Indians with fall outfits. Ross hoped that he would be fortunate enough to find natives who knew and possibly travelled the short cut. Pond's fortune had been in finding the guides who knew the Portage La Loche approach to the far northwest. Ross drowned in 1799 while continuing his search for an alternative route to the Athabaska.

David Thompson, Ross' colleague in the search for a northward approach, succeeded in reaching the east end of Lake Athabaska in July, 1796.<sup>39</sup> Setting out in 1794 from York, Ross and Thompson travelled up the Nelson-Burntwood rivers, across the portage to the Churchill River where they wintered at Fairford House<sup>40</sup> in 1795-1796. In the spring of 1796, Thompson, in company with two Chipewyan guides, made his way up Reindeer River, through Reindeer Lake, over the Cochrane River to Wollaston Lake from where he proceeded down the Black River to Lake Athabaska. Thompson and Ross spent the next year in a vain attempt to reach the Athabaska by the same path. The lack of deep water and

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. xxv.

<sup>40</sup> Located at the junction of Reindeer and Churchill rivers. R. Glover (ed.), Thompson's Narrative, p. xxx.



provisions proved to be obstacles in the way of this approach.<sup>41</sup> With Thompson's resignation from the Hudson's Bay Company in 1797 and Ross' untimely death in 1799, the hopes for a northern approach faded.

The Committee took a step in a positive direction by sending orders to York and Churchill in 1799 for the former to withdraw from any Athabaska projects. Churchill was to receive reinforcements for an Athabaska approach. William Linklater set up a trading post at Ile-a-là-Crosse in 1799 while William Auld built Essex House at Green Lake and Peter Fidler built Bolsover House on Meadow Lake. In the same year Fidler also built Greenwich House on Lac La Biche. During the winter he travelled the Lac La Biche River and went up the Athabaska to the mouth of the Lesser Slave Lake River.<sup>42</sup> The extension of the Company's trade into the regions bordering the Athabaska country foreshadowed Fidler's expedition there.

After an unsuccessful venture at Chesterfield House on the South Saskatchewan in 1800, Fidler returned to Cumberland House to prepare for the Athabaska. In 1802, he travelled over the Churchill-Methy-Clearwater route to Lake Athabaska. There, on English Island, he built Nottingham House.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., pp. xxvi-xxvii.

<sup>42</sup>A. S. Morton, History, p. 453.

<sup>43</sup>Nottingham House Journals, 1802-1803, Hudson's Bay Company Archives, B 39/a/1.





Fidler's attempts at trade epitomized the cautious policy of his employers; the Bay men were hired to trade, not to fight. The London Committee, well away from the scene, was guided by a desire not to become embroiled in a test of strength with their Canadian rivals. The object of the Adventurers was not to out-trade their Montreal competitors, but to gain a fair share of the trade which would assure a respectable return on their investments:

The great and first object of our Concerns is an Increasing Trade to counterbalance the very enormous and increasing Expences of it. We do not expect returns equal to those of our more powerful Opponents but we ought to receive such returns as are adequate to the quantity of goods you are annually supplied with.<sup>44</sup>

Fidler's Athabaska campaign was doomed to failure; the Bay men were no match for the aggressive Northwesters. In 1802-1803 Fidler and company spent most of their waking hours seeking sufficient provisions. Thomas Swain was sent to establish a post on Peace River, but he returned during the winter in a near-starved condition. The Canadians had made short work of him. The following season Fidler returned to Nottingham House and once again spent a dismal winter warding off his fierce rivals. In 1805-1806, the Bay men spent most of the season confined to their post, overwhelmed by the bullying practices of their Canadian tormentors. Three seasons produced few returns. The Indians were not impressed by the men of Nottingham House. The Hudson's Bay Company abandoned the Athabaska to the North West Company.

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<sup>44</sup>Quoted in E. Rich, History, vol. 2, pp. 256-257.





The North West Company did not come through this period without internal dissensions and the competition of other Canadians in the Athabaska. The surrender of the Western Posts in 1796 to the United States in accordance with the Jay Treaty of 1794 influenced firms which had been trading in American territory to turn to trading ventures in the British northwest.<sup>45</sup> The XY Company, which had its beginnings in 1798, reached the Athabaska in the following year.<sup>46</sup> The new company approached the Athabaska down the Pembina and Athabaska rivers to Lake Athabaska where they established a post on Little Island.<sup>47</sup> Their Canadian rivals posed a more serious threat than the English to the North West Company's trading organization. The XY Company used similar business methods in extending its inland trade.<sup>48</sup> In 1801, Alexander Mackenzie placed his experience and influence at the head of the firm.<sup>49</sup> In 1802 it was reported that the new competition had a capital equal to that of the North West Company.<sup>50</sup> In the Athabaska country the XY men established posts on Peace River which assured a supply of provisions for the trade.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>A. S. Morton, History, p. 509.

<sup>46</sup>E. Rich, History, vol. 2, p. 215.

<sup>47</sup>A. S. Morton, History, p. 510.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>L. Masson, op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 76-77.

<sup>50</sup>Report of the Canadian Archives, 1892, Ottawa, pp. 136-137.

<sup>51</sup>Nottingham House Journals, 1802-1803, loc. cit., B 39/a/1.



Although the XY did not succeed in wresting the trade from the older company, the ensuing rivalry marked the beginning of a new spirit of relations for the trade.

The domestic feud between the old North West Company and the New North West, the XY Company, as it came to be called, habituated the men of both parties to deeds of violence.<sup>52</sup>

Violence came to a climax in the murder of a North West servant by an employee of the XY Company at Fort de l'Isle on the North Saskatchewan in 1802.<sup>53</sup> The outcome of the violence was the Canada Jurisdiction Act of 1803. This act had consequences for the Athabaska trade since it stated that crimes committed in the Indian territories were subject to Canadian laws. Secondly, civil magistrates, who could arrest and escort guilty parties to trial in Lower Canada, were appointed by the Governor or Lieutenant-Governor. The result was that a number of Northwesters were appointed as magistrates. Their aims were to remove any opposition "under the pretense of legal formalities".<sup>54</sup> The conflict was brought to an end by the death of Simon McTavish which opened the way for a union of the Canadian companies in 1804.

The success of the North West Company in the early nineteenth century aided them in plans for a greater expansion of its trading empire.<sup>55</sup> The proposed projects of finding an acceptable route to the

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<sup>52</sup>A. S. Morton, History, p. 508, Cf. E. Rich, History, vol. 2, pp. 273-274.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

<sup>54</sup>E. Rich, History, vol. 2, p. 274.

<sup>55</sup>E. Rich, History, vol. 2, pp. 170-171.



Pacific and organizing a maritime trade required a great deal of initiative and capital. The role of the Athabaska was not only to serve as a jumping-off place for the inland expansion to the Pacific, but also to supply the furs which would finance this expansion. The extension of inland trade was bringing increased transportation expenses. Two of the Northwesters, Duncan McGillivray and Alexander Mackenzie, firmly believed these costs could be reduced if the Canadians could obtain a right of transit through Hudson Bay.<sup>56</sup>

Although undismayed by the 1804 Canadian coalition, the Hudson's Bay Company, aware of the legal opinion that its Charter was not based on Parliamentary sanction but solely on Royal prerogative, and aware also that it could not afford a trade war with its rivals, decided to seek a settlement at the bargaining table.<sup>57</sup> The Northwesters, for reasons given above, were also quite prepared to negotiate an agreement. The Committee was willing either to enter a union with their rivals, or, to sell their assets and properties to the North West Company.<sup>58</sup> The negotiations broke off in 1806 when neither party could agree upon where the center of trade should be, i.e., in London or Montreal, and upon the failure of a guarantee which would see all Canadian traders adhere to a negotiated settlement.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup>H. Innis, The Fur Trade, p. 278.

<sup>57</sup>E. Rich, History, vol. 2, p. 259.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p. 262.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., p. 263.





Since the turn of the century the Hudson's Bay Company had faced the rising costs and lower prices caused by the Napoleonic wars and unsettled conditions in Europe. The dividend was reduced from eight per cent to four per cent in 1801. From 1806 to 1808 the furs piled up in the warehouses with no chance for an export market.<sup>60</sup> In 1809, no dividend was paid. With a lack of markets and recruits the Committee despaired of continuing in the business of the fur trade.<sup>61</sup> Only the entry of Andrew Wedderburn to the Committee prevented the Company from temporary withdrawal from the trade. Wedderburn, Thomas Douglas, Earl of Selkirk, and John Halkett brought a business initiative which was to change the course of the Hudson's Bay Company's policy.<sup>62</sup>

The Retrenching Plan, as Wedderburn's plan came to be called, was founded upon the firm commitment to continue in the fur trade.<sup>63</sup> There was to be a profit-sharing plan with the servants of the Company. The firm was to stabilize its position in the trade through sound economical management. The other part of the plan came from the suggestions of William Auld and Colin Robertson.

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<sup>60</sup>Ibid., p. 264.

<sup>61</sup>George Wollaston's proposals, which came near to being implemented, were to pursue a timber trade on the Bay, accompanied with a withdrawal from the fur trade. Colin Robertson's Correspondence Book, September, 1817 to September, 1822, E. E. Rich (ed.), The Hudson's Bay Record Society, vol. II, pp. xxix-xxx. Hereafter referred to as E. Rich (ed.), Robertson's Letters.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., p. xxi.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., p. xxii.



William Auld had been interested in gaining a foothold in the Athabaska for a number of years.<sup>64</sup> He believed the approach to the Athabaska must come from Churchill. In 1807, Fidler had travelled inland from Churchill toward Lake Athabaska on what was reported to be a new track.<sup>65</sup> Auld spent the winter of 1808 at Reindeer Lake where he became convinced of the necessity of an Athabaska campaign led by men who would be willing to use force against the Northwesters. His conviction rings in his emphatic comment, "Good God! See the Canadians come thousands of miles beyond us to monopolize the most valuable part of your Territories."<sup>66</sup> It was at Reindeer Lake that Auld met the Northwester Colin Robertson, who, dissatisfied with his present employers, decided on a change. Robertson, too, had ideas in the trade which corresponded with Auld's. Both men travelled to London in 1809 to lay their views before the Committee. The instructions subsequently given acknowledged the necessity for more active servants who would at least defend themselves and their employer's property.

We expect that you will defend like men the property that is entrusted to you; and if any person shall presume to make a forcible attack on you, you have arms in your hands and the Law sanctions you in using them for your own defence.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup>E. Rich, History, vol. 2, p. 265.

<sup>65</sup>E. Rich (ed.), Robertson's Letters, p. xxxvii.

<sup>66</sup>E. Rich, History, vol. 2, p. 286.

<sup>67</sup>Quoted in E. Rich (ed.), Robertson's Letters, p. xxxii.



An Athabaska enterprise was moreover recognized to be an important part of any further trade activity.

... as the discussions of 1814 and 1815 emerged ... it became more and more clear that an Athabaska venture was accepted as the decisive issue....<sup>68</sup>

The Hudson's Bay Company was prepared to undertake the Athabaska campaign in 1814 when they engaged Colin Robertson to recruit and outfit an expedition in Montreal for the Athabaska country. In 1815, John Clarke travelled to the Athabaska through the Methy-Clearwater route. He built Fort Wedderburn on Potato Island. The North West Company was now opposed by men who knew how to counter the methods of the 'Northwest spirit'. Undaunted by a disastrous year, Clarke returned in 1816, only to find a tougher opposition. A prisoner until August, 1817, Clarke was unable to form an 1817-1818 outfit; the Bay men only placed a token force on the lake that season. Colin Robertson led the 1818-1819 brigade into Athabaska and the season proved to be more of a success. The determination of the Bay men to return each succeeding season began to make an impression upon the Indians. Robertson correctly believed that the first goal should be to win them over; the furs would follow. By 1821, the Hudson's Bay Company seemed on the verge of a complete victory. Then word arrived of the amalgamation of the two companies. The Athabaska conflict was over. The time of high prices, high wages, and free gifts was finished; the necessity of adapting to a new monopoly was now the order of the day.

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<sup>68</sup>E. Rich, History, vol. 2, p. 316.





## CHAPTER TWO

### THE FORTS AND THEIR LOCATIONS

The discovery of an approach was the beginning in the organization of the fur trade in the Athabaska country. The next step was to locate suitable sites for trading posts. The locations generally tended to move deeper into the heart of the region as the fur trade developed in the far northwest. This shifting of the forts inland was the usual practice in the opening of any new district to the trade. With no knowledge of where the Indians lived, and with no knowledge of possible sources of provisions, the first traders depended on native advice and their own experience.<sup>1</sup> In the Athabaska district, the posts were moved north from Pond's House on the Athabaska River to a final location on the northwest shore of the lake. Although the demand for furs was the driving force behind the expansion of the inland trade, there were other important factors in determining the choice of a fort site. The problem of transportation to and from the immediate vicinity of the fort was a factor. The location of the Indians had to be considered. It was important to have the fort situated in a place where trade with the Indians could be intercepted, especially during times of competition. A fort had to have a convenient location not only for the fur trade, but for the provisions trade. The entry of rival traders could make a move necessary. The object of the following

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<sup>1</sup>R. Glover (ed.), Thompson's Narrative, p. xxvi.



discussion is to show how the locations of the forts on Lake Athabaska were related to the above factors.

In 1778, Peter Pond made a successful approach over the Portage La Loche and down the Clearwater and Athabaska rivers to a spot approximately forty miles south of the lake. There, on the east bank of the Athabaska River, about half a mile past the point where the Embarrass River branches off, he built a trading house. The site was noted in 1791 by the Hudson's Bay Company surveyor, Philip Turnor:

... the river at this place parts into two branches followed the Eastern one, the river passed this day much as before, went in the East branch N $\frac{1}{2}$  and came to Peter Ponds [sic] old House.....<sup>2</sup>

The Historic Sites of Alberta have placed the location of Pond's fort in NE 14-108-10-W4th, but aerial photographs have shown this location to be on the west shore of the river and part of an island. Guy Blanchet said that the fort was located near the cut bank where the Embarrass branches from the main current although he found nothing of the original site.<sup>3</sup> Snowbird Marten, an old trapper who has lived near the entrance of the Embarrass all his life, said that a number of old graves were washed into the river about a mile upstream from the present Embarrass Portage store and post office.<sup>4</sup> The erosion is quite heavy along the shore and it is possible that the original site has been washed away.

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<sup>2</sup>J. B. Tyrrell (ed.), Hearne and Turnor Journals, p. 394.

<sup>3</sup>Guy H. Blanchet, "Emporium of the North", The Beaver, March, 1946, p. 32.

<sup>4</sup>I am indebted to Mr. Peter Nortcliffe, Forestry officer at Embarrass Ranger Station, for this information.



In the choice of a site, Pond was undoubtedly influenced by three considerations: the availability of a food supply, the proximity of a water route, and the prospects of trade. Provisions were a prime necessity for survival through the long winter months. The banks of the Athabaska River were a haven for moose and deer; hence Pond was assured of a food supply. Big game would probably be scarce on the delta which stretched north from the trading house. The rations of the traders were supplemented by the produce of a garden which Pond planted.<sup>5</sup> With scant knowledge of the delta and lake, Pond probably preferred to remain on the river where he knew he could leave quite soon after the break-up. His experience would tell him the ice on the river would go out before that on the lake. Then too, the spring voyage would be upstream to the Portage La Loche, and the necessity of tracking the canoes for a great part of the way was probably taken into consideration.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Pond may not have had guides who knew the intricate routes leading to and from the lake. The Athabaska delta is a bewildering maze of creeks and rivers to all but the most experienced voyageur.

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<sup>5</sup>Voyages from Montreal through the continent of North America to the frozen and Pacific oceans in 1789 and 1793 with an account of the rise and state of the fur trade, by Alexander Mackenzie, vol. 3 of Master-Works of Canadian Authors, John W. Garvin (ed.), The Radisson Society of Canada Ltd., Toronto, 1927, p. 246. Hereafter referred to as, J. Garvin (ed.), Mackenzie's Voyages. Gardening is discussed in Chapter 4, infra.

<sup>6</sup>The voyageurs 'tracked' a canoe by pulling it with a rope fastened to the bow of the vessel. Tracking occurred most often in places of swift or shallow water.





A related problem of interpreters could also have arisen from the difference in language between the Chipewyan and Cree Indians. Pond and his men were certainly able to communicate in Cree and it is perhaps significant that his fort was located near the northernmost edge of the Cree country. Were he to winter in the Chipewyan and Beaver country he might experience difficulty in gathering provisions from the Crees. The Chipewyans were never noted for their generosity in trading provisions.<sup>7</sup> The tribes were not on the friendliest terms in the latter part of the eighteenth century.<sup>8</sup> A letter from Alexander Henry the Elder to Joseph Banks in 1781 on the possibility of a route to the Pacific through the Athabaska country hinted at the language problem:

... when everything is ready and provisions procured for the summer, as no dependance [sic] can be put, on what you are to receive in an unknown part.... A new sett [sic] of interpreters [sic] and guides must be procured....<sup>9</sup>

Henry did not travel beyond Ile-a-là-Crosse Lake and his account of the country beyond the headwaters of the Churchill River was undoubtedly based on information from Pond.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, Pond chose a location where the Indians could be intercepted when they travelled out with their furs to Ile-a-là-Crosse, Cumberland

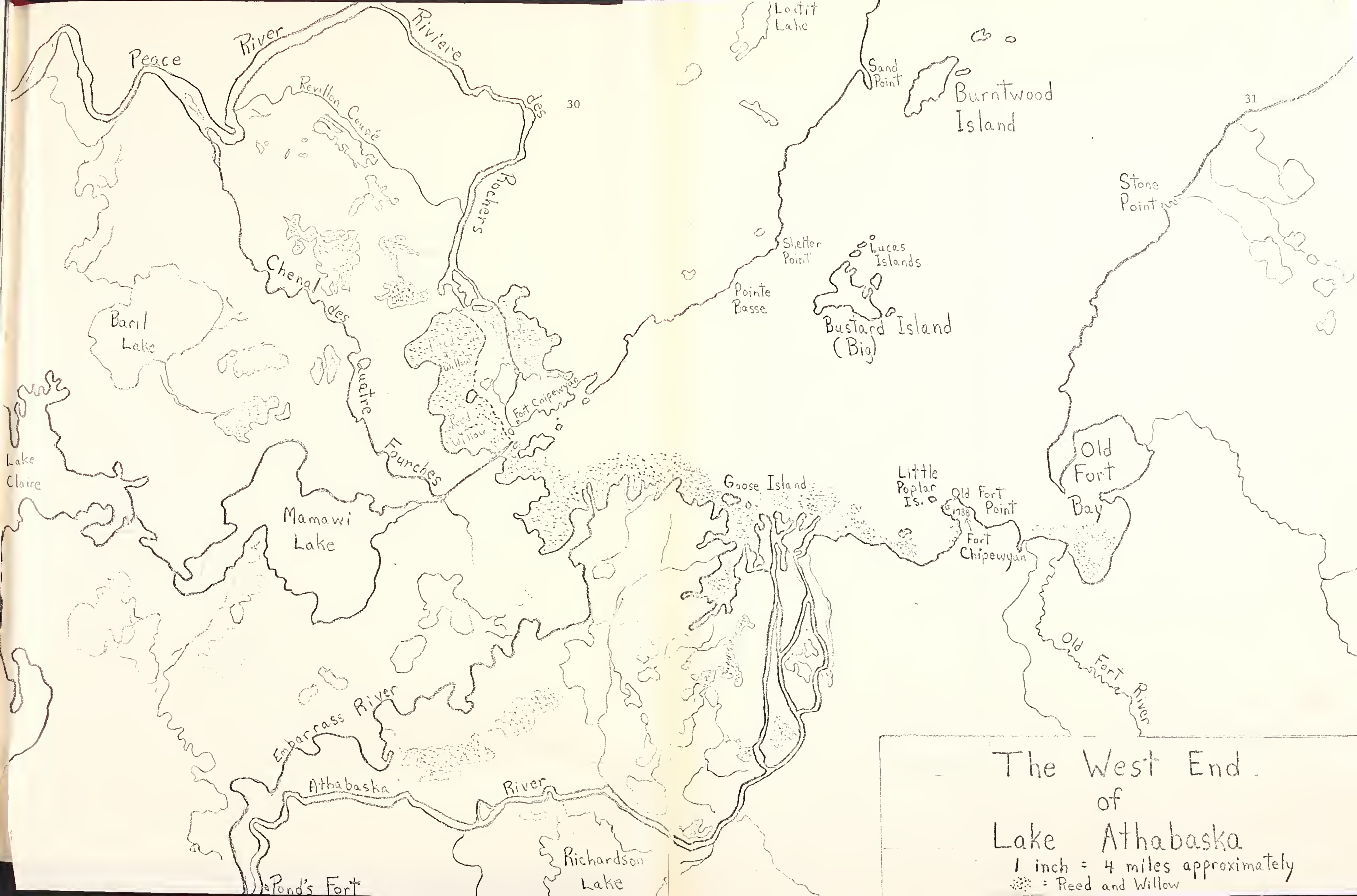
<sup>7</sup>J. B. Tyrrell (ed.), Hearne and Turnor Journals, p. 455.

<sup>8</sup>A. S. Morton, History, p. 295.

<sup>9</sup>Quoted in Burpee, L. J., The Search for the Western Sea: The Story of the Exploration of Northwestern America, Toronto, 1908, p. 583.

<sup>10</sup>H. Innis, Peter Pond, p. 82.





The West End  
of  
Lake Athabaska  
1 inch = 4 miles approximately  
\* = Reed and Willow





House, and Hudson Bay. The trade route was along the Churchill River and the only means of reaching it was by travelling up the Athabaska and Clearwater rivers.<sup>11</sup> The best possible point would be where the river flows into the delta. The Athabaska River branches into two main channels near Pond's house; the Embarrass River meanders in a northerly direction and the main channel makes an easterly swing before flowing into the lake.

Pond's buildings are unfortunately not described in any surviving documents; the only hint comes from Alexander Mackenzie who described Pond's first residence as a "tent" on the river bank.<sup>12</sup> There must have been some kind of dwelling for the twenty men who accompanied Pond. This fort remained the fur trade rendezvous for the next decade.<sup>13</sup>

From this post on the Athabaska River, the fur traders pushed west and north into the Peace and Great Slave regions. Apparently Pond did not have too much time for exploration in the Athabaska until his third trip into the country in 1783 when he went in early from Ile-a-là-Crosse. It is possible that he explored Lake Athabaska that year. He learned of the Mackenzie system leading to an ocean from Indians who had accompanied Hearne on his Coppermine expedition.<sup>14</sup> These initial explorations

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<sup>11</sup>J. B. Tyrrell (ed.), Hearne and Turnor Journals, p. 450. A. S. Morton, History, p. 289.

<sup>12</sup>J. Garvin (ed.), Mackenzie's Voyages, p. 20.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>14</sup>H. Innis, Peter Pond, p. 27.





of Pond led to trading expeditions. In 1786, Cuthbert Grant and Laurent Leroux established rival posts on Great Slave Lake.<sup>15</sup> In November, MacLeod and Boyer set out on foot for Peace River with twelve men and 900 pounds of goods and returned to the fort in December of the same year.<sup>16</sup> The briefness of their journey meant they did not penetrate any great distance into the Peace River region. The failure of the canoes to reach Pond's house before freeze-up in 1787 led Alexander Mackenzie to report in 1788 that the prospects for trade were discouraging unless a place could be established which would attract the Chipewyans. He thought there was little chance of getting goods to Peace River and Great Slave Lake before freeze-up. The outlook would be improved if a "rendez-vous" could be established near Lake Athabaska in Chipewyan country.<sup>17</sup> Alexander Mackenzie's ambitious plans for an extension of the fur trade, coupled with his ideas of reaching the Pacific Ocean, were sufficient to gain the support of his cousin, Roderick Mackenzie. In 1788 Roderick accompanied Alexander to Pond's fort where the outfits were made up for the Athabaska. Roderick then travelled north to the lake. In his words:

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<sup>15</sup> J. Garvin (ed.), Mackenzie's Voyages, p. 138.

<sup>16</sup> L. Masson, op. cit., vol. 1, R. Mackenzie's Reminiscences, p. 24. Cf. J. N. Wallace, The Wintering Partners on Peace River, from the Earliest Records to the Union in 1821, Thorburn and Abbott, Ottawa, 1929, p. 18.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., R. Mackenzie's Reminiscences, p. 25.



... I looked out for a suitable spot for a new establishment to replace the old one of Mr. Pond. After making every possible enquiry and taking every measure of precaution I pitched on a conspicuous projection that advances about a league into the Lake, the base of which appeared in the shape of a person sitting with her arms extended, the palms forming as if it were a point.<sup>18</sup>

The point of land referred to projects into the lake about six miles east of the river's east branch (Big Point Channel). The land (marked on maps as Old Fort Point and hereafter referred to as such) extends well into the lake, evidence of Mackenzie's "every measure of precaution". The site was surrounded by water on three sides; the only approach by land was from the south. The fort was built on the west side of the point, where it was sheltered from the east winds blowing off the lake. The route of the canoes to the main channel was protected by islands and bays along the south shore. Certainly the south shore provided more timber growth for a wood supply than the scrub growth on the north shore.<sup>19</sup> The bush and forest on the south shore was (as it still is) a better habitat of moose and deer than the north shore. Big game, however, was not so much in Mackenzie's thoughts as the availability of fisheries:

It [the fort site] is altogether a beautiful, healthy situation, in the center of many excellent and never-failing fisheries, provided they are duly attended to at the proper season.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>19</sup> Lake Athabaska is on the dividing line between the Canadian Shield and the Great Central Plain. There is a contrast between the barren rocky appearance of the north shore and the sandy forested south shore east of the Athabaska River delta.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.



The fisheries around Old Fort Point, with one exception, still provide an abundance of whitefish and pike to the people of Fort Chipewyan. The exception is Goose Island; the water around the island has silted in from the muddy river. The other fisheries were centered around Little Poplar Island (one half mile north and west of the fort) and Bustard Island, which is situated approximately eight miles across the lake.

Although the south shore site had many advantages, the expansion of the trade made a relocation of the fort necessary in the 1790s. Alexander Mackenzie's explorations revealed the potential of regions beyond Lake Athabaska. In order to exploit this potential the canoes had to reach the Peace River country and Great Slave Lake before freeze-up. No doubt Roderick Mackenzie explored every possibility when the need became evident.<sup>21</sup>

The traders' interest in setting up trading posts on the northwest shore arose from several factors. The need for a rendezvous had been to provide a depot for the developing trade of the Peace and Mackenzie regions. Hence, as the trade was extended, the northwest shore proved to be in a more central place than Old Fort Point. Although the main channels of the Athabaska River enter the lake near Old Fort Point, the Embarrass River, and smaller streams flow in a more northerly direction to the west end of the lake. These latter streams are usually the first

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<sup>21</sup>Witness, for example, his re-discovery of the old Kaministiquia water route from Lake Superior to Lac la Pluie. Ibid., p. 46.





free of ice in the delta. The fur traders would naturally seek the shortest route with open water. The early opening of the channel on the northwest shore proved to be a major consideration.

The map below shows that the northwest shore forts were situated on the channel of water which leads from Lake Athabaska. Around Dog Head, the Rivière des Rocher runs almost due north for some thirty miles, where it meets the Peace River.<sup>22</sup> South of the entrance to the Rivière des Rocher the Chenal des Quatre Fourches flows four miles west to a junction with streams from the south and west (hence its name, Four Forks). The west channel connects with Mamawi and Claire lakes. The main channel of the Quatre Fourches winds north approximately forty miles, to join the Peace River. The Rocher and Quatre Fourches rivers normally drain Lake Athabaska except when the Peace River is in flood in the spring and early summer. It is then that these two channels carry the overflow of the Peace River into the lake. Thus, the current of the channel by the northwest shore is reversed until the water level of the lake is brought up by the spring floods of the Athabaska River. The Athabaska River usually breaks up after the Peace in the vicinity of the lake since the delta of the former slows the force of the spring run-off.

The time of break-up was undoubtedly a factor in relocation. At Old Fort Point the ice does not break as soon as the ice on the northwest shore channel. The ice of this channel is broken up by the reversal of

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<sup>22</sup>In correct geographical terms, the Slave River begins where the Rocher and Peace rivers merge.



the current. The problem of the ice was noted in April of 1792 by Philip Turnor:

... began to haul the Furrs [sic] &c to within about 6½ miles of the mouth of the Athapescow river to be in readiness to proceed up the river so soon as it is clear of ice ... if we had remained at the House in expectation of going out of the Lake at water we might have been detained many days by the wind setting the Ice from the Westward in upon this shore....<sup>23</sup>

The Northwesters must have encountered this difficulty of getting the furs away in the spring before Turnor's visit. The ice would not only be pushed against Old Fort Point by a west wind, but also by an east wind, which coming down the lake, tends to force the drift ice against the south shore.

The need for open water routes in early spring was intensified by two other considerations. There was the provisions supply from Peace River, which was so necessary for the outgoing brigades. The reversing of the current meant that the provisions and furs could be delivered to the rendezvous quite early. Then too, a northwest site was easily reached by the Great Slave-Mackenzie River canoes. From the northwest shore, the earliest open water route to the south was through the Embarrass River and its tributaries.

The convenience of the Indians was also a determining factor in the choice of a site. Roderick Mackenzie probably found that the south shore site, although situated near abundant fisheries, and with a beautiful view, was not the best place for meeting the Chipewyans. The

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<sup>23</sup>J. B. Tyrrell (ed.), Hearne and Turnor Journals, pp. 448-449.



Chipewyans' lands lay to the north and east of Fort Chipewyan. Since they were not adept in the handling of canoes, considerable difficulty would be experienced in crossing the lake in summer. Wind conditions also make the lake dangerous to cross at this point. Cuthbert Grant (senior) most likely realized this problem when he set up his post on the north shore, near what today is called Fidler Point. He established this post "at the principal pass of the Caribou Eaters, when they were coming to this place."<sup>24</sup> The desire to build a fort for trade with the Chipewyans must have been considered in relocation because the south shore site was closer to Cree territory than Chipewyan territory. The hostility of the two tribes also had to be taken into consideration.

The exact date of the change in sites is unknown. It has been set around 1804<sup>25</sup> but this date is rather late. It becomes obvious from Peter Fidler's Nottingham House journals that the North West Company was already located on the north shore. It took Fidler four and a half hours to sail and paddle across the lake to the "French houses". The Indians were already assembled at Fort Chipewyan awaiting their fall advances.<sup>26</sup> A careful study of James Mackenzie's 1799-1800 journal leads to the conclusion that the fort had been established on the north shore for some time.

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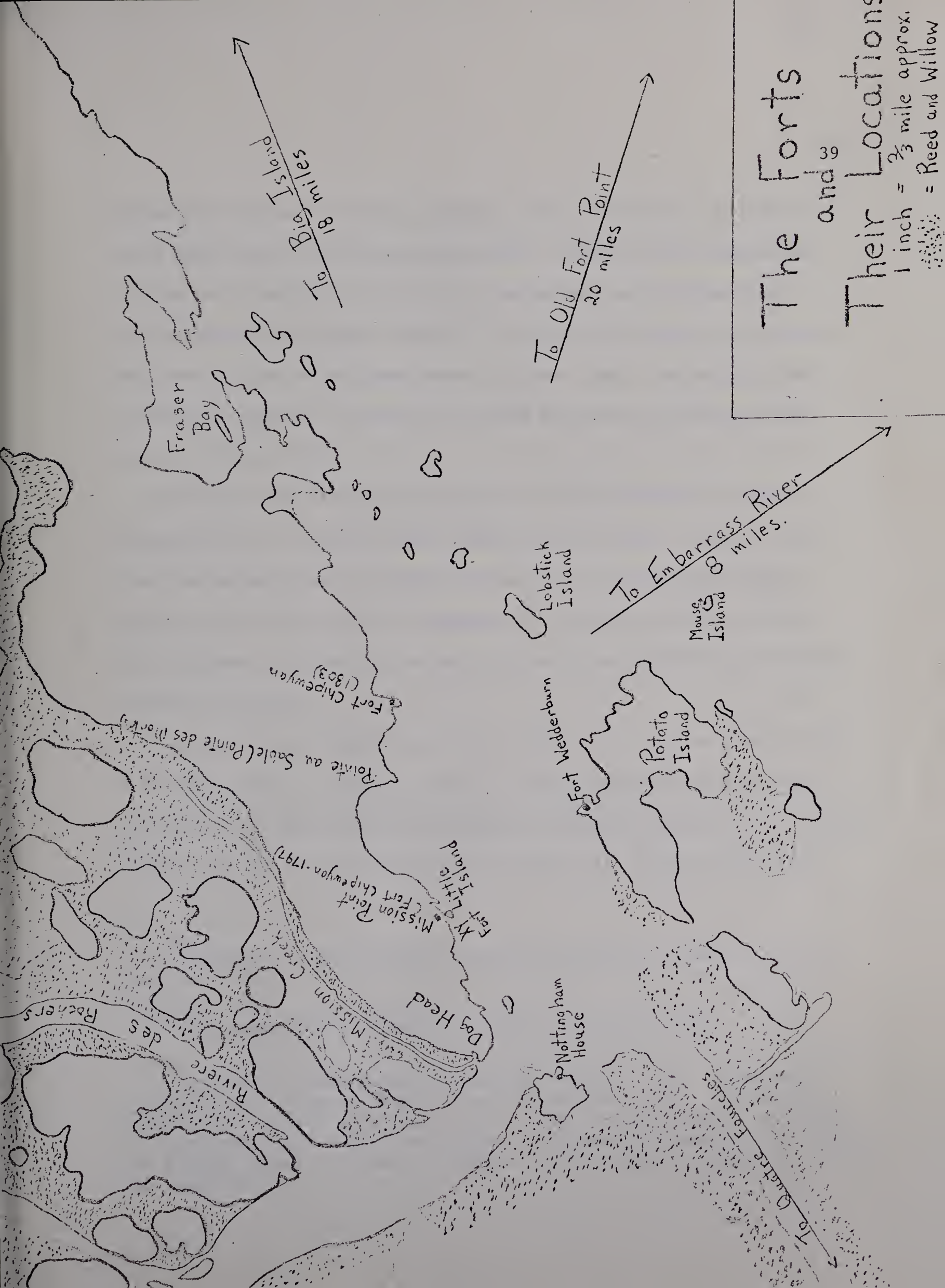
<sup>24</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1820-1821, B 39/e/3, p. 20.

<sup>25</sup>Simpson, Sir George, Journal of Occurrences in the Athabasca Department by George Simpson, 1820 and 1821, and Report, Rich, E. E. (ed.), Hudson's Bay Record Society, London, 1938. Appendix A, p. 414. Hereafter referred to as E. Rich (ed.), Simpson's Athabasca Journal.

<sup>26</sup>Nottingham House Journals, 1802-1803, B 39/a/1, Sept. 18, 1802.







# The Forts

and <sup>39</sup>

## Their Locations

1 inch =  $\frac{2}{3}$  mile approx.  
[Symbol] = Reed and Willow



Mackenzie referred to several places, such as the Pointe aux Chiens (Dog Head), which are on the north shore. Mackenzie also complained of the poor condition of the fort - the pickets were falling down, and the bark covering was rotten.<sup>27</sup> It is obvious then, that the fort had been located on the north shore for some time. The state of the buildings suggests at least two or three years which would place the move in 1796 or 1797.

The North West Company's first fort on the northwest shore was situated near or on what is now called Mission Point. Fidler records that Nottingham House (on English Island) was located about three-quarters of a mile from Fort Chipewyan.<sup>28</sup> The most logical place at this distance is Mission Point which gives an excellent view of the Lake in every direction.

The arrival of competition at the close of the century brought about a further change in sites. On May 22, 1800, James Mackenzie records the arrival of three opposition canoes at Bustard Island.<sup>29</sup> A. S. Morton stated that six more canoes went in by way of the Pembina River from

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<sup>27</sup>Journal of James Mackenzie, Public Archives of Canada (P.A.C.), April 16, 1800.

<sup>28</sup>Nottingham House Journals, B 39/a/3, Sept. 18, 1803.

<sup>29</sup>Journal of James Mackenzie, P.A.C., May 22, 1800. The present Bustard Island is about 18 miles east of Fort Chipewyan. The Bustard Island which Mackenzie referred to is probably Goose Island. It would be unreasonable, as well as hazardous, for canoes to cross to the present-day Bustard Island. Mackenzie referred to Big Island as Bustard Island, Aug. 23, 1800.





the Saskatchewan.<sup>30</sup> Although Mackenzie did not mention the arrival of more canoes, it is possible that more arrived since his journal ends on September 5. Perronne, the opposition trader, was attempting to get to Ile-a-là-Crosse, no doubt with the intention of supplying provisions to incoming canoes and to act as a guide.<sup>31</sup> James Mackenzie's reaction to competitors was, "In order to prevent them from building a fort on the Pointe au Sable the prettiest spot for that purpose on this Side of the Lake Mr. Finlay marked it for the N W Co."<sup>32</sup> The XY Company chose Little Island, directly in front of Fort Chipewyan on Mission Point.<sup>33</sup>

When Peter Fidler arrived in 1802 the fur forts of the Canadian companies were thus already situated on the northwest shore. Fidler chose a site on the southeast corner of English Island where there was an adequate wood supply and a fishery close at hand.<sup>34</sup> Having despatched

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<sup>30</sup>A. S. Morton, History, p. 510. The opposition could have reached the Athabaska country in 1799, however, since Mackenzie said, on August 10, "the Potties arrived from the Peace River". It seems unlikely that the XY Company penetrated into Peace River by way of Lesser Slave Lake.

<sup>31</sup>Journal of James Mackenzie, P.A.C., Aug. 24, 1800.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., May 22, 1800. This Pointe au Sable was probably the sandy point which is now referred to as Pointe des Morts by the old timers (see map). Lefroy said, "The prettiest point in the neighbourhood is called the Pointe des Morts from the burial ground which is placed there. Lefroy, John Henry, In Search of the Magnetic North, Stanley, G. (ed.), The MacMillan Company, Toronto, 1955, p. 85. Hereafter referred to as G. Stanley (ed.), Lefroy's Magnetic North.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., May 23, 1800.

<sup>34</sup>Nottingham House Journals, 1802-1803, B 39/a/1, Sept. 22, 1802.





Thomas Swain with nine men in three canoes for Peace River, Fidler and the seven men remaining commenced building a trading house, 50' by 15'. In addition to the main house, mens' houses were built. The roofs and walls were mudded in and the interior walls were whitewashed.<sup>35</sup> A fish storage shed was constructed in December. A garden, which yielded turnips and potatoes, was planted in 1803 and a seven-foot stockade was built around it in 1805.<sup>36</sup> In October of 1803, the Northwesters built a watchhouse close by Nottingham House.

As a result of this competition the North West Company moved to what became the permanent site of Fort Chipewyan in the summer of 1803.<sup>37</sup> The move was very likely occasioned by the fact that the XY fort on Little Island was in a better position to intercept the Indians coming in from the east. The XY men promptly moved their house to a place near Fort Chipewyan.<sup>38</sup> In October of 1803, the Northwesters built a watch house close by Nottingham House. After the North West Company moved, Fidler also planned to relocate his house. His men cut logs for a house with the dimensions of 50' by 17' by 14'. The move never came about, which is no doubt explained by the shortage of servants in the following year.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., April 23, 1803.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., May 10, 1803; B 39/a/4, April 22, 1805.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., B 39/a/3, Sept. 18, 1803.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., B 39/a/3, Nov. 13, 1803.

<sup>39</sup>Fidler and Thomas Swain, accompanied by eight men in two canoes, comprised the whole of the Athabaska expedition for 1804-1805. Ibid., B 39/a/4, Aug. 3, 1804.



During this period of competition, the North West Company operated a provisions post on Lake Claire. J. N. Wallace shows Porter's fort on the west side of this lake.<sup>40</sup> Fidler said that the XY Company had a post on Lake Claire in 1803.<sup>41</sup> These posts, which were designed to collect provisions from the Crees, were apparently abandoned after 1804.<sup>42</sup> In an effort to prevent the XY Company from trading with the Caribou Eaters, Fond du Lac was established at the east end of Athabaska Lake.<sup>43</sup> This post was closed in 1804 after the killing of its men by the Chipewyans. Pierre au Calumet was established for the North West Company near the mouth of Calumet Creek on the Athabaska River in 1802. It was situated on the east shore, opposite the creek. The post served the Crees and collected provisions for the passing brigades.

After the coalition of the Canadian companies, the full brunt of the competition fell upon the small force of Bay men. Intimidated by the North West 'bullies', with nothing to show in returns, the Hudson's Bay Company relinquished its precarious hold in the Athabaska in 1806.<sup>44</sup>

When the Company returned to the Athabaska in 1815, John Clarke began the construction of Fort Wedderburn on Potato Island, immediately

<sup>40</sup>J. N. Wallace, op. cit., p. 57. Porter closed the post on Aug. 7.

<sup>41</sup>Nottingham House Journals, B 39/a/3, Nov. 16, 1803.

<sup>42</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1820-1821, B 39/e/3, p. 20.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>Nottingham House Journals, B 39/a/5a, June 9, 1806.



across the channel from Fort Chipewyan, the North West Company headquarters. The first site of Fort Wedderburn was found unsuitable because it was too close to the belligerent North West men.<sup>45</sup> The fort was rebuilt on the northwest side of the island, about a mile from English Island.<sup>46</sup> After the amalgamation of 1821, Fort Chipewyan became the headquarters of the new company.

The Hudson's Bay Company also established outposts near Lake Athabaska. Harrison's House was constructed a few miles west of Fond du Lac (which was reopened) in 1819; and, the same year, Berens' House was set up to oppose the provisions post of Pierre au Calumet.<sup>47</sup>

The fur trade posts on the Peace River were also vital to Fort Chipewyan's existence since they supplied much of the provisions used in the long voyage out in the spring.

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<sup>45</sup>E. Rich (ed.), Simpson's Athabaska Journal, Appendix A, p. 426.

<sup>46</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1820-1821, B 39/e/3, p. 21.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. 20.





### CHAPTER THREE

#### THE PROBLEMS OF TRANSPORTATION AND A PROVISIONS SUPPLY

Supplied with provisions from the Saskatchewan and aided by not having to return to Grand Portage, Peter Pond succeeded in reaching the Athabaska country in 1778.<sup>1</sup> His expedition proved that the Athabaska was worth further efforts to tap its fur preserves since he returned with 140 packs.<sup>2</sup> It was reported that he was forced to leave as many more because he lacked the means to bring them out.<sup>3</sup> Also of significance is the fact that he and his men arrived at Cumberland House "in a very distressed state for want of provisions."<sup>4</sup> Thus from the beginning transport and a provisions<sup>5</sup> supply proved to be major problems for the Athabaska trade.

The success of the trade at Fort Chipewyan depended upon a solution. The North West Company, relying upon canoes, required a huge supply of provisions for its voyageurs. After 1821 the Hudson's Bay Company replaced

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<sup>1</sup>E. Rich, History, vol. 2, p. 76.

<sup>2</sup>Cumberland House Journals and Inland Journals, 1775-1782, Second Series, 1779-1782, Rich, E. E. (ed.), The Hudson's Bay Record Society, London, 1952, p. 5. Hereafter referred to as E. Rich (ed.), Cumberland House Journals, Second Series.

<sup>3</sup>J. Garvin (ed.), Mackenzie's Voyages, p. 20.

<sup>4</sup>E. Rich (ed.), Cumberland House Journals, Second Series, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup>The word "provisions" is taken to mean the food required for maintaining the fort and its brigades.



canoes with boats and thereby reduced the demand but the organization of a provisions supply was worked out before 1821. The change-over from canoes to boats was the major development after the amalgamation. Fort Chipewyan, strategically located on the route to the far northwest, proved to be not only a storehouse for furs but also for provisions for the district.

The letters of Alexander Mackenzie suggest that the Canadians were only able to maintain a tenuous hold on the Athabaska in the 1780s and a contributing factor to this situation was the uncertainty of an adequate food supply.<sup>6</sup> Evidently Pond, or possibly Mackenzie, discovered that the Peace River country was a valuable source of meat. "It is quite possible that Pond solved the problem of the Athabaska trade by discovering the use of pemmican rather than dried meat."<sup>7</sup> Innis also notes that Mackenzie gives the impression of a close association between the making of pemmican and the Chipewyan Indians.<sup>8</sup> Some doubt has been cast on the validity of these suggestions since Vilhjalmur Stefansson implies Henry Kelsey was the first to use pemmican in his travels with the plains Indians in 1690-1692.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, it would not be unreasonable to assume that pemmican

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<sup>6</sup>L. Masson, op. cit., vol. 1, R. Mackenzie's Reminiscences, pp. 24, 34.

<sup>7</sup>H. Innis, Peter Pond, p. 87.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Stefansson, Vilhjalmur, The Fat of the Land, The MacMillan Company, New York, 1956, p. 180. This view is also taken by Morton in his History, p. 113.





was more commonly known than Innis suggests. At any rate by 1787 it was an accepted fact that a provision trade must be carried on with the natives of the Peace River since A. Mackenzie writes in February, 1788:

Messrs. [Alexander] McLeod and [Charles] Boyer went off for the latter place [Peace River] on the 9th November, with twelve men and nine pieces, in order to trade some provisions for the canoes in their voyage out in the Spring....<sup>10</sup>

In the same report, Mackenzie states the need of a rendezvous if a satisfactory trade is to be carried on.

Pond's House was not in the most advantageous location for gathering provisions from the Peace since it was too far south. Moreover, the main food for the men would be the moose and buffalo meat required for the outgoing brigades. Another cheap source of food had to be found if there was to be any basis for an expansion of the trade in the Athabaska. Fortunately the excellent fishing grounds on Lake Athabaska were to solve some of the difficulties.

By 1787 the traders certainly knew of these fishing grounds on the lake. Roderick Mackenzie states that they were to "depend on our own industry in fishing for a living"<sup>11</sup> at the new establishment of Fort Chipewyan. Fish could be used to feed the Athabaska traders while dry provisions were collected for the canoe brigades. Alexander Mackenzie stresses the role which Fort Chipewyan played in providing food for the fur traders:

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<sup>10</sup>L. Masson, op. cit., vol. 1, R. Mackenzie's Reminiscences, p. 24, A. Mackenzie to Agents of the North West Company, dated Ile-a-la-Crosse, Feb. 1, 1788.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 27.





Here have I arrived with ninety or an hundred men without any provision for their sustenance; for whatever quantity might have been obtained from the natives during the summer, it could not be more than sufficient for the people despatched to their different posts; and even if there were a casual superfluity, it was absolutely necessary to preserve it untouched, for the demands of the spring. The whole dependence, therefore, of those who remained, was on the lake, and fishing implements for the means of our support.<sup>12</sup>

The fisheries which sustained Fort Chipewyan were located around Goose and Bustard islands, and Old Fort Point. During the summer months, fishing tended to be good near the north shore site of Fort Chipewyan, but in the fall a lowering of the water level caused the fish to move to deeper water. After the canoes arrived, usually in September, the men were sent to Goose Island and Old Fort Point where the fall fisheries were set up. In early winter, usually just before freeze-up, a fishery was also set up at Bustard Island (then known as Big Island).<sup>13</sup> A good fall fishery meant that enough fish would be taken to maintain the fort until spring, a fact which Turnor notes:

This Lake has a very fine fishery for about three weeks after the Ice first sets fast in which time as many may be taken as would serve four Months....<sup>14</sup>

Food, as Mackenzie explains, was often in limited supply in the fall and thus the extra men remaining at Fort Chipewyan were sent to the fisheries to maintain themselves, a customary policy whenever there was a shortage of food at the fort. In his 1820-1821 report, William Brown

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<sup>12</sup>J. Garvin (ed.), Mackenzie's Voyages, p. 94.

<sup>13</sup>Supra, chapter 2, p. 13n.

<sup>14</sup>J. B. Tyrrell (ed.), Hearne and Turnor Journals, p. 454.



says that before 1812 the Northwesters used "to starve at this place".

Consequently,

They adopted the plan "Of giving every two fishermen from ten to twelve nets, with a certain number of fish which they were to procure in the course of the season - And in order that their provisions might not be destroyed in bringing them to the Fort, two men were appointed to drive eight or ten traineaux" which haul home their fish in the early part of the season and their meat in the latter. So that they not only receive their provisions at the Fort with very little deduction, but are enabled to dispense with the service of a number of their men, who are either sent in company with their Indians to take care of the Furs they procure, or dispersed in small parties to find their own subsistence, until their service [sic] are required in the spring.<sup>15</sup>

Two difficulties in operating the fisheries were the length of the freeze-up in the fall, and the carrying of the fish to the fort. If the fall freeze-up was a long process of alternate freezing and thawing periods, the lake remained impassable by canoe or sledge. In these circumstances the fort was often reduced to a starvation diet.<sup>16</sup> If the nets were set out before the ice was thick enough, they could be lost or damaged in drift ice.<sup>17</sup> The hauling of the fish from the fisheries, over a distance from eighteen to twenty-one miles up the lake, proved an arduous task. Men, dogs, and

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<sup>15</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1820-1821, B 39/e/3, p. 6. A traineaux, or traine, was a sledge about 7 to 8 feet in length constructed of birch, the front end was turned up so it could easily pass over the ice and snow, and was usually pulled by dogs. Cf. C. Gates, Five Fur Traders, p. 219n.

<sup>16</sup>Fort Chipewyan Post Journals, 1819-1820, B 39/a/15, Nov. 3, 1819.

<sup>17</sup>Fort Chipewyan Post Journals, 1831-1834, B 39/a/29, November 22, 1832; November 15, 1833.





traineaux were used after the ice was strong enough to carry their weight. The surface of the ice never failed to present drifts, jagged edges, and ice ridges which made the haul a long and hazardous one. The possibilities of fog or a blinding snow storm presented additional dangers:

... one of the Old Companies [sic] men was very near lost yesterday evening from the Island. 2 of his dog sledges loaded with fish are not to be found - he slept in and lost within one mile of their house - but as the drift was so much he was afraid to leave it....<sup>18</sup>

Small evergreens were placed as markers on the trail in the event of bad weather.<sup>19</sup>

The method of taking the fish has probably changed very little at Fort Chipewyan. Philip Turnor says that nets of 360 feet were best, although some of shorter length were used. In winter, one end of the net was fastened to the end of a long pole which was passed through a hole under the ice by means of forked sticks to another hole. There the other end of the net was secured.<sup>20</sup> David Thompson adds that the floats and weights are of wood and stone, with a net mesh of five to six inches used for whitefish.<sup>21</sup> Roderick Mackenzie describes the disagreeable business of handling the nets:

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<sup>18</sup> Nottingham House Journals, 1804-1805, B 39/a/4, January 17, 1805.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., November 22, 1804.

<sup>20</sup> J. B. Tyrrell (ed.), Hearne and Turnor Journals, p. 455.

<sup>21</sup> R. Glover (ed.), Thompson's Narrative, p. 61.





The fingers and wrists, while occupied in managing the nets and disentangling the fish from the meshes, must be kept constantly immersed [sic] to prevent their freezing.<sup>22</sup>

The number of fish which were caught seems prodigious, but the daily allowance probably averaged eight pounds per man<sup>23</sup> which meant 100 men would consume 800 pounds each day. Assuming the average weight of a whitefish to be from three to four pounds,<sup>24</sup> this many men would require nearly 200 fish. In one season, 1831-1832, the fisheries yielded approximately 48,000 fish,<sup>25</sup> while Brown states that nearly 57,000 were taken in 1820-1821.<sup>26</sup>

The species of fish which were caught differed in food value. Turnor notes that whitefish, pike, and perch were the general catch while a few trout were also taken:

... the white fish turns very soft after the beginning of December the Perch likewise turn poor the Pike continues good....<sup>27</sup>

Trout was valued as a fish which could be dried and used to feed the canoemen. Peter Fidler's men were obliged to use dried fish for their

<sup>22</sup>L. Masson, op. cit., vol. 1, R. Mackenzie's Reminiscences, p. 28.

<sup>23</sup>R. Glover (ed.), Thompson's Narrative, p. 94.

<sup>24</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1820-1821, B 39/e/3, p. 8.

<sup>25</sup>Fort Chipewyan Post Journals, 1831-1834, B 39/a/29, January 19, 1833.

<sup>26</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1820-1821, B 39/e/3, p. 7.

<sup>27</sup>J. B. Tyrrell (ed.), Hearne and Turnor Journals, p. 455.



outward voyages in 1803<sup>28</sup> and 1804.<sup>29</sup>

There were two methods of preserving the fish. In the warm months, the perch and trout were split open and dried on willow sticks in the sun. After freeze-up, the fish were frozen in fish storage sheds at the fisheries and then carried to the fort to be placed in an ice cellar.

The ration of fish was augmented by the bringing in of wild fowl. Geese, ducks, and swans were in abundance on the delta in both spring and fall. Turnor describes the ease with which they could be brought down:

... they are then killed setting as they come to the sands at the rate of two or three a shot and they keep flying backwards and forwards the whole day as there is no tide to cover the sands....<sup>30</sup>

The birds were cured with salt brought from the Salt River which is located approximately sixty miles north near the Slave River.

These salt springs are located near the Slave River approximately seventy-five miles north of Fort Chipewyan. They are situated less than fifteen miles west of a short portage from the Slave to the Salt River. George Back described them in 1834:

... on arriving at the proper spot, we filled our five large bags with pure and white salt; in the short space of half an hour. There were not mounds like those seen in 1820; but just at the foot of the hill which bounds the prairie in that quarter, there were three springs, varying in diameter from four to twelve feet, and producing hillocks of salt, from fourteen

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<sup>28</sup> Nottingham House Journals, 1802-1803, B 39/a/1, March 8, 1803.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., May 6, 1805.

<sup>30</sup> J. B. Tyrrell (ed.), Hearne and Turnor Journals, p. 454.





to thirty inches in height. The streams were dry, but the surface of the clayey soil was covered, to the extent of a few hundred yards towards the plain, with a white crust of saline particles.<sup>31</sup>

The salt was used to supply the districts northwest of Cumberland House.<sup>32</sup>

It was a strong mixture, but, when ground or pounded well, was suitable for its purpose:

... all the salt used in the North up to that time and for some years afterwards, was taken from these springs, where it was annually shovelled up into sacks for distribution among the various trading posts of the country. It was regarded by the Company's people as perfectly wholesome. It was, however, considered necessary, in order to make it suited for table use, that it should first be passed through a coffee mill or pounded in a piece of dressed leather.<sup>33</sup>

While the fisheries provided for the inhabitants of Fort Chipewyan, the chief concern of the fort was to collect an adequate supply of provisions for the brigades. Fort hunters were engaged at Fort Chipewyan for the winter months.<sup>34</sup> These hunters were either canoe men whose

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<sup>31</sup>Back, George, Narrative of The Arctic Land Expedition To The Mouth of The Great Fish River, and Along The Shores of The Arctic Ocean, in the Years 1833, 1834, and 1835. John Murray, London, 1836, pp. 80-81. Hereafter referred to as G. Back, Narrative.

<sup>32</sup>Harmon, Daniel, Sixteen Years in the Indian Country, The Journal of Daniel Williams Harmon, 1800-1816. Lamb, W. Kaye (ed.), The MacMillan Company, Toronto, p. 116. Hereafter referred to as W. Lamb (ed.), Harmon's Journal. E. Rich (ed.), Simpson's Athabasca Journal, pp. 58, 283, 341.

<sup>33</sup>Garrioch, A. C., The Far and Furry North, Douglass-McIntyre Limited, Winnipeg, 1925. Garrioch was a grand-son of Colin Campbell, a clerk and later a Chief Factor in the Athabaska district in the first half of the nineteenth century.

<sup>34</sup>Nottingham House Journals, 1805-1806, B 39/a/5a, Nov. 24, 1805.





services were not required during the winter or, more often, Cree Indians or métis who were able hunters. Their ability as hunters was the most important criterion since some were less skilled than others.<sup>35</sup> They were equipped with ammunition, tobacco, and food and sent to kill moose, buffalo, and deer in the surrounding country. The hunt for animals centered around Lake Claire, and it ranged as far west as Peace Point on Peace River and north to the Salt Plains west of the Slave River. Apparently five to six days "march" was considered the limits of the range (travelling empty, Peace Point was three days by dog team from the fort) but these limits would undoubtedly depend on the size of the kill, the weather, and upon how badly the fort needed provisions. The North West Company, for example, had men hunting buffalo between Portage La Loche and the rapids on Slave River.<sup>36</sup>

Provision accounts, taken from surviving journals, reveal that an animal rarely yielded more than 300 pounds of fresh meat for the fort, a fact which suggests the hunters and carters consumed a sizable portion of the meat. John Charles gave precise details:

... the weight of the moose and buffalo is 10,051 lbs. nearly 288 lbs. each, the weight of the deer 2283 about 120 each, most of the deer were brought a short distance the consumption therefore considerably less than when fetching the other animals from five and six days March, and the Men of course help themselves liberally on the Journey, as is their usual Custom.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>Fort Chipewyan Post Journals, 1831-1834, B 39/a/29, Feb. 4, 1833.

<sup>36</sup>Nottingham House Journals, 1804-1805, B 39/a/4, Oct. 23; Dec. 9; Dec. 15; 1804.

<sup>37</sup>Fort Chipewyan Post Journals, 1831-1832, B 39/a/28, April 24, 1832.



The size of the wood buffalo (bison bison athabasca Rhoads) was noted by David Thompson when his party killed two bulls in the vicinity of Ile-a-là-Crosse on June 4, 1812:

... all the Bisons that take to the Woods, become much larger than those of the plains, these were so, their horns from tip to tip measured two feet, and on the curve twenty-eight inches, and when fat [they] must weigh at least two thousand pounds.<sup>38</sup>

Professor J. Dewey Soper corroborates the size of the animals, stating that the average weight for a male is 1,800 pounds and from 800 to 1,200 pounds for a female.<sup>39</sup> Thompson also describes the moose as, "the noblest animal of the Forest, and the richest prize the Hunter can take."<sup>40</sup> The reasons for this high estimate were the value placed on the meat, hide and bones.<sup>41</sup>

There were two methods of hunting by the Indians and these were undoubtedly imitated by the Europeans. Tracking was employed when there were tracks to follow, and tracing was the detection of browsing, rubbing, and other signs which an animal left as it travelled.<sup>42</sup> The hunters were likely to have a more successful moose hunt when the snow cover, hardened by frequent thaws and freezes, permitted the use of snowshoes. The moose broke through the crust, thus allowing the hunters to pursue their quarry

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<sup>38</sup>R. Glover (ed.), Thompson's Narrative, p. 397.

<sup>39</sup>Soper, J. Dewey, "History, Range, and Home Life of the Northern Bison.", Ecological Monographs, vol. 2, No. 4, October, 1941, pp. 347-412.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 83.





to an exhausted standstill. The chase might be over in six or eight hours or it could continue for two days.<sup>43</sup>

The moose was more difficult to hunt than the buffalo since the former was a wary animal which never permits a hunter to make a direct approach.<sup>44</sup> The buffalo, on the other hand, usually remains unconcerned when a hunter approaches. When aroused, however, the buffalo was much harder to overtake than the short-winded moose.<sup>45</sup> Samuel Hearne gave a vivid account of the wood buffalo chase:

... when pursued they always take to the woods. They are of such an amazing strength, that when they fly through the woods from a pursuer, they frequently brush down trees as thick as a man's arm; and be the snow ever so deep, such is their strength and agility that they are enabled to plunge through it faster than the swiftest Indian can run in snow-shoes.... I soon found that I was no match for the buffaloes, notwithstanding they were then plunging through such deep snow, that their bellies made a trench in it as large as if many sacks had been hauled through it.<sup>46</sup>

After the chase and the killing of a buffalo, the skinning of one of these huge animals was a sizable task:

... they are so heavy, that when six or eight Indians are in company at the skinning of a large bull, they never attempt to turn it over while entire, but when the upper side is skinned, they cut off the leg and shoulder, rip up the belly, take out all the intestines, cut off the head, and make it as light as possible, before they turn it to skin the under side.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>R. Glover (ed.), Hearne's Journeys, pp. 182-183.

<sup>44</sup>R. Glover (ed.), Thompson's Narrative, p. 83.

<sup>45</sup>R. Glover (ed.), Hearne's Journeys, pp. 163; 182.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. 163.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. 162.





When a kill was made word was sent to the fort and "carters" with dogs and sleds were either despatched immediately, or the meat was cached until it could be picked up.<sup>48</sup>

The animals were brought in on sledges which were constructed for that purpose. Daniel Harmon's description is one of the best:

These sledges are made of two thin boards turned up at the fore end, and joined closely together, so that this vehicle is twelve or fourteen inches broad, and seven or eight feet in length.<sup>49</sup>

Apparently the bush sleds differed in construction from the ones used on the lake. The lake sleds did not have the front end boards turned as high as the ones used in the bush where trails often led over low bush and bumpy muskeg.<sup>50</sup> The birch used in making these sleds was collected along the Embarrass River after freeze-up.<sup>51</sup> It normally took twelve to thirteen sleds to carry 300 to 400 pounds of fresh meat on a trip.<sup>52</sup> The average time taken for meat carters to journey to Lake Claire and return was seven days.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Journal kept at Fort Chipewyan (manuscript copy), in possession of the Provincial Library, Edmonton, Alberta, February 2, 1823. Hereafter referred to as Fort Chipewyan Journal, Alberta Provincial Library.

<sup>49</sup> W. Lamb (ed.), Harmon's Journal, p. 261.

<sup>50</sup> Fort Chipewyan Journal, Alberta Provincial Library, Nov. 27, 1823.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., Nov. 17, 1823.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., Jan. 14, 1824; Dec. 29, 1822.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., Dec. 25, 1822.



The dogs that pulled these sleds meant as much to the trapper and trader in winter as the canoes did during summer. Without dogs, the fort could hardly operate since the provisions had to be carried a considerable distance. Peter Fidler and his men were in difficulty in the winter of 1802-1803 when, without the assistance of dogs, they had to pull sleds with fish from Old Fort Point (twenty miles). Only the generosity of the XY Company in loaning their dogs and sleds saved the English from a winter of misery.<sup>54</sup> An estimate of the pulling capacity of dogs is given by Harmon:

Each pair of dogs drew a load of from two hundred, to two hundred and fifty pounds, besides provisions for themselves and their driver, which would make the whole load about three hundred pounds. I have seen many dogs, two of which would draw on a sledge, five hundred pounds, twenty miles, in five hours.<sup>55</sup>

During the spring and summer the dogs were placed at the fisheries where food was more plentiful.

The first horses to be used at Fort Chipewyan arrived from Peace River in 1804.<sup>56</sup> The lack of feed and the hungry dogs made it difficult to keep them.<sup>57</sup> They were fed fish in 1822.<sup>58</sup> The men's summer duties included the gathering of hay (probably swamp grass).<sup>59</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Nottingham House Journals, 1802-1803, B 39/a/1, Dec. 27, 1802.

<sup>55</sup> W. Lamb (ed.), Harmon's Journal, p. 147.

<sup>56</sup> Nottingham House Journals, 1803-1804, B 39/a/3, May 20, 1804.

<sup>57</sup> Fort Chipewyan Journal, Alberta Provincial Library, June 4, 1823.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., March 6, 1823.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., July 24, 1823.



At the fort the meat was weighed and stored in the ice house which was covered with snow and ice. The one built in 1823 measured twelve feet square and ten feet deep.<sup>60</sup> These houses or cellars held from 4,000 to 7,000 pounds of fresh meat. Their principal use was for the preservation of meat in the spring and early summer.

The Indians were also given ammunition to make fall and spring provision hunts.<sup>61</sup> The fort relied upon the Indians' trade in provisions since they were encouraged to bring in the dried or pounded meat and the grease from which pemmican was made. Alexander Mackenzie describes the methods of drying meat:

... the lean parts of the flesh of the larger animals are cut in thin slices, and are placed on a wooden grate over a slow fire, or exposed to the sun, and sometimes to the frost.<sup>62</sup>

David Thompson states that dried meat is less than one-third of its former weight<sup>63</sup> and Stefansson says that it is one-sixth of its original weight.<sup>64</sup> He also notes that one pound of dried meat is equal to six pounds of lean meat in food value.<sup>65</sup> Pounded or beat meat was dried meat which was pounded into shreds which was used in making pemmican. Pemmican making which was done at the fort, is described by Thomas Simpson:

<sup>60</sup>Fort Chipewyan Journal, Alberta Provincial Library, April 1, 1823.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., May 30, 1823.

<sup>62</sup>J. Garvin (ed.), Mackenzie's Voyages, p. 125n.

<sup>63</sup>R. Glover (ed.), Thompson's Narrative, p. 84.

<sup>64</sup>V. Stefansson, op. cit., p. 196.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid.





The meat, which has been cut into flakes and dried in the sun ... is conveyed to the establishment. It is there pounded in a mortar, or by beating on an extended hide. The fat is boiled in a cauldron, and skimmed of all impurities; an equal quantity of pounded meat is added to the fat, and the mixture is well stirred and poured hot into skin bags. It hardens in a few hours, and is fit either for immediate use or to be kept for three to four years.<sup>66</sup>

The fat was an important part of the pemmican since it gave the mixture its palatable qualities. Both Alexander Mackenzie<sup>67</sup> and David Thompson stressed the importance of this ingredient. Thompson tells of the qualities of buffalo fat:

... the fat of the Bison is of two qualities, called hard and soft; the former is from the inside of the animal, which when melted is called hard fat (properly grease) the latter is made from the hard flakes of fat that lie on each side [of] the backbone, covering the ribs, and which is readily separated, and when carefully melted resembles Butter in softness and sweetness.<sup>68</sup>

He also states that the pemmican bags were thirty inches long, twenty inches wide, and only four inches thick, thus making their flat shape suitable for storage in canoes.<sup>69</sup> The dried meat was given to those who travelled short distances. On September 16, 1823, James Keith records:

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<sup>66</sup> Simpson, Alexander, The Life and Travels of Thomas Simpson, The Arctic Discoverer, (Original edition, London, 1845), The Canadian Heritage Series, Baxter Publishing Company, Toronto, 1963, pp. 136-137. Hereafter referred to as A. Simpson, Life and Travels.

<sup>67</sup> J. Garvin (ed.), Mackenzie's Voyages, p. 125n.

<sup>68</sup> R. Glover (ed.), Thompson's Narrative, p. 312.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.



... sent 6 men to raise wood for the making of 10 canoes in the spring ... have provisions for 8 days (140 lbs. dry meat) ... <sup>70</sup>

Thus, each man was allowed a daily ration of nearly three pounds of dried meat. Pemmican was held in reserve for longer trips, such as those of the canoe brigades. The reason pemmican was saved for the voyageurs was that it provided the most nutrition in the least bulk. Whereas a man required eight pounds of fish or fresh meat a day, pemmican supplied the equivalent nourishment in one and a half pounds.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, pemmican was an expensive food to prepare since R. O. Merriman points out that only fifty-five pounds of pemmican and forty-five pounds of dried meat came from 400 pounds of fresh meat.<sup>72</sup> The reasons for such a small quantity were the shrinkage caused by drying and the fact that the best pemmican was made from meat that was completely free from gristle and fat.<sup>73</sup> Pemmican, then, was the food which sustained the men of the brigades who had to make contact with the outside world.

Pemmican, as a concentrated food, was ideal for the brigades. The crew of a canoe required a large amount of pemmican for a voyage:

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<sup>70</sup>Fort Chipewyan Journal, Alberta Provincial Library, September 16, 1823.

<sup>71</sup>R. Glover (ed.), Thompson's Narrative, p. 313.

<sup>72</sup>Merriman, R. O., "The Bison and the Fur Trade", Queen's Quarterly, vol. 34, p. 84.

<sup>73</sup>V. Stefansson, op. cit., p. 198.





Those brigades which proceed N.W. of Cumberland House require three additional bags of pemmican [in addition to the two bags for each Saskatchewan canoe] per canoe, and some a fourth.<sup>74</sup>

In 1821 Simpson estimated 100 bags were needed for the Athabaska district.<sup>75</sup> An elaborate system for providing these provisions was organized.

The importance of the Peace River country as a source of provisions has been noted already and it only remains to explain how the supply of provisions was organized:

... the Canadians send a single large Canoe up it [Peace River] with only three men and fetch down two Tons of dried Provisions at a time and this Canoe keeps working most of the Summer on purpose to Supply the Athapescow Settlement which is the grand Magazine of those parts from which the Slave Lake, Peace River and Athapescow River Canoes are supplied in the fall of the year and reserve a stock of provisions for the Spring....<sup>76</sup>

In August, just before the arrival of the canoes from Lac la Pluie, a load of provisions would arrive from Peace River so as to ensure a plentiful supply of food for the brigades.<sup>77</sup> During the winter

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<sup>74</sup>Coues, Elliot (ed.), New Light on the early history of the greater Northwest: The manuscript journals of Alexander Henry, fur trader of the Northwest Company, and of David Thompson, official geographer and explorer of the same company, 1799-1814; exploration and adventure among the Indians on the Red, Saskatchewan, Missouri, and Columbia Rivers, New York, 1897, vol. 2, p. 539, Sept. 13, 1809. Hereafter referred to as E. Coues, New Light.

<sup>75</sup>E. Rich (ed.), Simpson's Athabasca Journal, p. 267.

<sup>76</sup>J. B. Tyrrell (ed.), Hearne and Turnor Journals, p. 452.

<sup>77</sup>The Great Slave Lake and Mackenzie River regions lacked the animals necessary to make dry provisions. Fort Chipewyan Post Journals, 1831-1834, B 39/a/29, April 27, 1834.





provisions were collected at Fort Vermilion and Dunvegan; in the spring these were sent to Fort Chipewyan to supply the outgoing brigades.<sup>78</sup> Provisions were also supplied at Pierre au Calumet (Berens' House after 1821) on the Athabaska River.

Although care was taken to ensure a provisions supply, there were times when the brigades went hungry. These times occurred throughout the period of study for this thesis. Daniel Harmon met Athabaska brigades who had nothing to eat for four days.<sup>79</sup> Peter Fidler noted a shortage of provisions in 1804.<sup>80</sup> In 1823 there were only eight bags of pemmican to send with the canoes destined for the forts north and west of Chipewyan.<sup>81</sup> In 1834 Richard King met the brigade:

At the entrance of Methye Lake we met five boats from Portage La Loche, laden with furs, and containing - men, women, and children - about forty persons, entirely destitute of provisions. They had stripped off the rind of every poplar and birch tree they met with, in order to procure the soft pulpy vessels in contact with the wood; but these, though sweet, are very insufficient to satisfy a craving appetite.<sup>82</sup>

It is impossible to give all the reasons why there was a shortage of provisions without studying the records of the Peace River forts.

<sup>78</sup> Nottingham House Journals, 1804-1805, B 39/a/3, May 6, 1804.

<sup>79</sup> W. Lamb (ed.), Harmon's Journal, p. 26, July 26, 1800.

<sup>80</sup> Nottingham House Journals, 1804-1805, B 39/a/4, Sept. 16, 1804.

<sup>81</sup> Fort Chipewyan Journal, Alberta Provincial Library, Aug. 15, 1823.

<sup>82</sup> King, Richard, Narrative of a Journey to the Shores of the Arctic Ocean, in 1833, 1834, and 1835, under the command of Captain Back, R. Bentley, London, 1836, vol. 1, pp. 82-83. Hereafter referred to as R. King, Narrative.



Some of the reasons at Fort Chipewyan are probably similar to those of the Peace River establishments. The season, a severe winter, or a late fall and spring, was a definite factor in provisions hunts.<sup>83</sup> The lack of men to gather them was another, especially when the fort was under-staffed in summer.<sup>84</sup> An ammunition shortage meant that the men could only look at the geese flying overhead.<sup>85</sup> When the fisheries failed, the stores of dry meat intended for the brigades were used.<sup>86</sup> It is possible that the encouragement of the Indians to hunt small furs, such as muskrat and marten, instead of beaver, caused them to neglect the provisions hunts.<sup>87</sup> These smaller animals were easier to kill.

The system of supplying provisions was developed by the North West Company, but improvements were made by the Hudson's Bay Company in the transportation system. The Northwesters relied upon canoes for transport. The Canadians, skilled in the construction and operation of canoes, were reluctant to use boats.

Most of the materials required for building canoes was available around Fort Chipewyan. Birch bark was collected toward Birch Mountain

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<sup>83</sup>Fort Chipewyan Post Journals, 1819-1820, B 39/a/15, Nov. 3, 1819.

<sup>84</sup>Fort Chipewyan Journal, Alberta Provincial Library, Aug. 2, 1822.

<sup>85</sup>Fort Chipewyan Post Journals, 1831-1834, B 39/a/29, Sept. 7, 1833.

<sup>86</sup>Fort Chipewyan Journal, Alberta Provincial Library, Oct. 30, 1822.

<sup>87</sup>Fort Chipewyan Post Journals, 1831-1834, B 39/a/29, Sept. 19, 1833.





along the Birch River.<sup>88</sup> Pine, which was plentiful along the Athabaska River, was used instead of cedar. Turnor said that, "the Canadians build of the largest size used in the North out of Pine but they never bring them in again this year they built two of them and rebuilt twelve cedar ones..."<sup>89</sup> Tar from the oil sands south of Pierre au Calumet was mixed with spruce gum for water-proofing the canoes.<sup>90</sup> Edward Smith, Chief Factor at Fort Chipewyan in 1822, gave their dimensions:

Those for the Trade measure about 32 feet from stem to stern, with 4 feet 5 inches, and 2 feet deep at midships, carry 25 pieces, 5 men, not including provisions and mens [sic] baggage, thus Equiped [sic] they come in 56 days from York Factory to Athabaska Lake last summer....<sup>91</sup>

Canoes, despite their speed, had certain disadvantages for transportation from Fort Chipewyan. First, the gummed seams cracked in cold weather. Fidler said he rubbed the seams with fat which was preferable to pitch in cold weather but it was easily rubbed off.<sup>92</sup> Secondly,

<sup>88</sup>J. B. Tyrrell (ed.), Hearne and Turnor Journals, p. 452.

<sup>89</sup>R. King, Narrative, vol. 1, p. 97.

<sup>90</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1822-1823, B 39/e/5, p. 7. Alexander Mackenzie's brigades covered the distance in 52 days from Lac la Pluie in 1788. L. Masson, op. cit., vol. 1, R. Mackenzie's Reminiscences, p. 29, A. Mackenzie to Partners, dated Athabaska, Feb. 14, 1789. Roderick Mackenzie took "one month 4 days" in a light canoe in 1800. Journal of James Mackenzie, P.A.C., Sept. 4, 1800.

<sup>91</sup>J. B. Tyrrell (ed.), Hearne and Turnor Journals, p. 508.

<sup>92</sup>Nottingham House Journals, 1802-1803, B 39/a/1, March 21, 1803; April 19, 1803.





the canoes had to be gummed several times en route. These stops delayed the brigades.<sup>93</sup> The lack of canoe materials at Great Slave Lake was a cause of frustration and delay.<sup>94</sup> The use of canoes rather than boats was probably a cause of the closure of the Mackenzie River posts in 1814. The frail craft had to be constantly attended and thus no thought was given to organizing two brigades for the Mackenzie River region so that canoes could be left at Portage La Loche.

Colin Robertson realized the advantage of boats during his Athabaska campaign against the North West Company,<sup>95</sup> but they were not used at Fort Chipewyan until 1823. The winter of 1822-1823 was a busy one for Robert Clouston, the boat-builder. His first problem was finding wood for keels. The keels of York Boats, constructed of red pine or larch, were shaped without any splicing or joinings.<sup>96</sup> After two weeks of looking, some suitable wood was found.<sup>97</sup> The other problems which he encountered were, "oakum, and iron is getting also so scarce that [we] have to get gun barrels beat out into nails...."<sup>98</sup> Linen cloth was

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<sup>93</sup>Fort Chipewyan Post Journals, 1831-1834, B 39/a/29, Sept. 16, 1833.

<sup>94</sup>Journal of John Porter, Public Archives of Canada (P.A.C.), May 19, 1800.

<sup>95</sup>E. Rich (ed.), Robertson's Letters, p. cxviii.

<sup>96</sup>Fort Chipewyan Journal, Alberta Provincial Library, Nov. 27, 1822; Feb. 4, 1823; Mar. 18, 1823.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid., Dec. 11, 1823.

<sup>98</sup>Ibid., Mar. 4, 1823.



used for caulking.<sup>99</sup> The results of his work were given proper recognition:

This afternoon Mr. Smith Sent off 4 boats for the Portage La Loche with a load of 34 Pks furs & 1 keg Castn each - 7 men each boat & passengers ... they left the rock at 2 p.m. - the first boats of the kind that ever sailed on Athabasca Lake - fired 2 shots with our canon [sic] on the occasion.<sup>100</sup>

There were several advantages in the new system. Ten canoes, carrying approximately 250 pieces, employed fifty to sixty men; four boats, carrying approximately 200 pieces, employed twenty-five to thirty-two men. Edward Smith reported that the change-over meant an immediate reduction of sixteen men.<sup>101</sup> The employment of fewer men meant that fewer provisions were required. It was estimated that each outgoing boat required eight bags of pemmican to travel to Cumberland House compared to five bags for each canoe.<sup>102</sup> Furthermore, fewer people would have to be kept at the fort to collect canoe materials.<sup>103</sup>

In his 1823-1824 report James Keith compared the financial advantage of boats over canoes for the Athabaska district. Ten canoes and four

<sup>99</sup>Ibid., Sept. 5, 1823. The construction of a boat took about 25 working days. Ibid., Feb. 21, 1823.

<sup>100</sup>Fort Chipewyan Journal, Alberta Provincial Library, May 21, 1823.

<sup>101</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1822-1823, B 39/e/5, p. 7.

<sup>102</sup>Fort Chipewyan Post Journals, 1823-1824, B 39/a/22, Copy of Letters relating to Athabaska, J. Keith to W. McKintosh, dated Fort Chipewyan, Dec. 5, 1823.

<sup>103</sup>Ibid.



boats brought in 429 pieces valued at £4,162.10.4.<sup>104</sup> The boats carried 209 pieces worth £2,000.3.5 and the canoes carried 220 pieces valued at £2,162.6.11. If an average of five men per canoe and eight men per boat is assumed, then fifty canoemen brought £2,162.6.11 while thirty-two boatmen brought £2,000.3.5. Consequently, the saving effected by the change from canoes to boats was considerable.<sup>105</sup>

Thus by the mid-1820s a reasonably successful system of transportation and provisions supply had been developed. The successful working of this system depended upon the officers and men who served at Fort Chipewyan.

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<sup>104</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1823-1824, B 29/e/6, p. 13.

<sup>105</sup>Keith estimated the average cost per piece for boats at £68.11.3 and for canoes £144.7. Ibid., p. 14.





## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE FORT AND THE MEN WHO SERVED IT

The success of the trade at Fort Chipewyan depended largely on the administrative abilities and personal qualities of the men who conducted its business. The isolation of the fort and its importance as an entrepôt for the northern districts, meant that sound, experienced leadership was important. Yet the fort could not function without the engagés, i.e., the labourers upon whose brawny backs the trade was carried. The surviving journals reveal that the men who composed the administrative and labouring force of the fort were much like men of today who are willing to seek a new life, perhaps fortune, on the frontiers of civilization. Possibly a life of freedom attracted some; others were lured by the promise of a better income which, if saved over years of service, would lead to purchasing land 'back home' where they could live out the remainder of their lives in comparative ease. To gain these goals, however, these men of the northern forest had to give up their youth and vigor to the environment and thereby were able to gain a free life of a different hue and culture.

While these men were ordinarily engaged to serve in the peaceful pursuit of gathering fur, during the periods of competition between rival traders, life at Fort Chipewyan was often filled with strife and violence. In the struggle between the companies men were hired for their fighting abilities. Although the life of the fort tended to revolve about seasonal activities, the conflicts between the companies tended to upset



the pattern and character of fort life. Violence reached its peak between 1815 and 1820.

Many of the journals and accounts of the trade on Lake Athabaska were often written during periods of competition. These documents reflect their times in that they describe and emphasize the conflicts. The routine activities of the forts are not described and yet it must be assumed that while some of these activities went on others were left unattended to give priority to competition.

During these periods much of the men's time was spent in watching their opponents' activities. Whenever a party set out from one fort, a rival group followed. The method of sending out men to trade and live with the Indians in their camps was known as en derouine. The North West Company, which held its superiority in numbers until the last year or so of the 1815-1821 conflict, sent men to watch the rival brigades moving inland. The policy was, as Peter Fidler noted, to prevent a provisions trade with the Indians along the way.<sup>1</sup>

A. S. Morton stated that the rivalry between the North West Company and the XY Company "habituated the men of both parties to violence."<sup>2</sup> The XY Company, under the leadership of Sir Alexander Mackenzie, sought to wrest the control of the Athabaska trade from the Northwesters between 1798 and 1804, an attempt which ended in failure. The Hudson's Bay

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<sup>1</sup> Nottingham House Journals, 1802-1803, B 39/a/1, May 9, 1803; Aug. 15, 1802; B 39/a/3, Aug. 15.

<sup>2</sup> A. S. Morton, History, p. 508. See also E. Rich, History, vol. 2, pp. 273-274.





Company also attempted to garner some of the Athabaska trade in a more peaceful manner. Fidler's journals reveal that the XY Company was very helpful and cooperated with the men from the Bay. This attitude was no doubt motivated by the fact that the more opposition the Northwesters had, the more likely their company was to lose its ascendancy in the trade. While the violence occurred between the Canadian companies,<sup>3</sup> the North West Company kept a close watch on the Hudson's Bay Company and obstructed its trade by not allowing the Indians to barter either furs or provisions with the English.

With the amalgamation of the two Canadian companies in 1804 the new Canadian company turned its combined forces against the inadequately staffed English. Fidler was told that the,

Proprietors of the North West Company were resolutely determined that the servants of the Hudson Bay Company should walk over their bodies than they would allow an Indian to go into the Hudson's Bay Company House....<sup>4</sup>

The men from the Bay were no match for the superior forces of the Canadians. The Hudson's Bay Company required a change in organization, policies and methods if the Northwesters were to be met on an equal footing.

During competition, then, a fort's first duty was to send men en derouine and to keep a close watch on rival traders. Consequently, some of the regular fort duties were probably sacrificed to the demands of competition. After 1821, the regular routine was described in greater

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<sup>3</sup> Nottingham House Journals, 1803-1804, B 39/a/3, Mar. 18, 1804.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 1804-1805, B 39/a/4, May 18, 1805.





detail and it is assumed that, before 1821, some of the regular fort duties were also carried on. The thesis is that the response of the men to their physical environment was much the same throughout the period of this study. The men and their response thus serve as the subject of this chapter.

The men who served in the Athabaska district came from different backgrounds. In both the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company the chief officers, i.e., the traders and clerks, were Scottish and English with few exceptions. The North West Company recruited its engagés from Quebec, or Lower Canada, whereas the Bay men were recruited from the Orkney Islands. The North West Company also engaged Iroquois whose skill in voyaging and hunting was a valuable asset. These varied backgrounds caused differences in the way in which the trade was carried on. For example, the Canadians and Iroquois were unexcelled in the handling of the canoes. These same men, however, required a greater adjustment to manage the larger, more cumbersome York boats used in transportation after 1821.

The engagés were the largest group of men employed in the trade. Men suitable for service in the Athabaska had to be seasoned voyageurs. They were hired for their strength and skill in manning the canoes which carried the goods for the trade. The work which separated a true homme du nord from a "pork-eater"<sup>5</sup> was the long voyage over the Churchill system

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<sup>5</sup> A "pork-eater" or mangeur de larde, was an engagé hired to man the canoes between Montreal and Grand Portage. The engagé who went beyond the Grand Portage was known as un homme du nord. The Athabaska men, however, considered a true homme du nord to be one who had crossed the Portage La Loche.



and the Portage La Loche to the Athabaska. An excellent esprit de corps apparently existed among the Athabaska voyageurs as they paddled inland. Duncan McGillivray tells of an incident which indicates the pride which these canoemen took in their work:

The Athabasca Men piqued themselves on a superiority they were supposed to have over the other bands of the north for expeditious marching, and ridiculed our men a la facon du Nord for pretending to dispute a point that universally decided in their favor. Our people [the Saskatchewan brigade] were well aware of the disadvantages they laboured under (being heavier loaded than their opponents) but they could not swallow the haughtiness and contempt with which they thought themselves treated, and tho' they could flatter themselves with no hopes of success from the event they resolved to dispute the Victory.... In consequence ... the two Bands instead of camping according to orders, entered the Lake at sunset.... They pursued the voyage with unremitting efforts without any considerable advantage for 48 hours during which they did not once put ashore, 'till at length, being entirely overcome with labour and fatigue, they mutually agreed to camp....<sup>6</sup>

Each north canoe carried a crew which varied from five to eight men. A full complement of eight men consisted of a bowman, a steersman, and six middlemen. The bowman, sitting in the bow, acted as the guide for the canoe. The six middlemen sat in pairs, about five feet apart, in the middle of the canoe. The steersman sat, or stood, in the stern of the canoe.<sup>7</sup> Each brigade was also conducted by a guide who was responsible

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<sup>6</sup> McGillivray, Duncan, The Journal of Duncan McGillivray of the North West Company at Fort George on the Saskatchewan, 1794-1795, Morton, Arthur S. (ed.), The MacMillan Company, Toronto, 1929, p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Kennicott, Robert, "The Journal of Robert Kennicott, May 19, 1859 - February 11, 1862", James, James Alton, The First Scientific Exploration of Russian American and the Purchase of Alaska, Northwestern University, Chicago, 1942, pp. 46, 48. Hereafter referred to as Kennicott's "Journal".





for the safety of the canoes and their contents. These guides were noted for the speed and efficiency at which their brigades travelled.

The cargo for each canoe was of great concern to the canoemen. George Back gives a description of how the 'pieces' were allocated for the North canoes at Fort William:

The Canadian voyageur is, in all respects, a peculiar character; and on no point is he ... more touchy, than in the just distribution of "pieces" among the several canoes forming a party.... The usual mode is for the guide to distribute or portion them out by lots, holding in his hand little sticks of different lengths which the leading men will draw. From the decision so made there is no appeal, and the parties go away laughing or grumbling at their fortunes.<sup>8</sup>

The distribution of the freight affected the speed of the canoes and the length of time spent on portages.

On the voyage the daily routine would be to rise at the first sign of dawn, raise camp, and travel three or four hours before stopping for breakfast, the main meal of the day. After breakfast the brigade would again set out and travel until late afternoon or early evening when the men would camp for the night. Lunch was usually a half-hour meal which was taken without stopping. The travel each day was divided into what the voyageurs called "pipes". A "pipe" was the time taken to smoke a pipe along the way, or a distance estimated by the voyageurs to be three leagues. David Thompson, however, found a "pipe" closer to a distance of two leagues.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Back, George, Narrative, p. 39.

<sup>9</sup>R. Glover (ed.), Thompson's Narrative, p. 133.





The wind was a factor in voyaging. If the wind was too boisterous, the frail canoes and their cargo were wind-bound. If the breeze was in their favor, the voyageurs were spared some toil by hoisting a sail.

The men had their ways of invoking a favourable breeze:

Our Iroquois, being tired with the day's journey, and longing for a fair wind to ease their arms, frequently in the course of the afternoon, scattered a little water from the blades of their paddles as an offering to La Vieille, who presides over the winds. The Canadian voyageurs, ever ready to adopt the Indian superstitions, often resort to the same practice, though it is probable that they give only partial credence to it.<sup>10</sup>

The bowman and steersman used their broad paddles in place of keels which the canoes lacked.<sup>11</sup> One solution to the problem of wind was to rise at two or three o'clock in the morning before the wind came up on the wide rivers and lakes.

An interesting comparison was made between the handling of boats and canoes by George Back in 1833:

... the River Maligne [north of Cumberland House] ... may with perfect propriety be described as one uninterrupted rapid; and was at that period so low, that the boats had to treble their distance in going backwards and forwards for the cargo. A glance at their manner of working was enough to satisfy me of their capability.... Still the contrast between us was great [Back was in a canoe with 8 men]; and my skilful guide De Charloit (a half-breed), did not fail to make the superiority of the canoe appear

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<sup>10</sup> Richardson, John, Arctic Searching Expedition, a Journal of a Boat Voyage through Rupert's Land and the Arctic Sea, in Search of the Discovery Ships under Command of Sir John Franklin, Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, London, 1851, (on the Churchill River), June 19, 1848, vol. 1, p. 92. Hereafter referred to as J. Richardson, Arctic Searching Expedition.

<sup>11</sup> Kennicott's "Journal", pp. 63-64.



to the best advantage. The cumbrous bateaux were dragged laboriously, a few paces at a time, by the united exertions of those on board and those on shore. Sometimes, unable to resist the impetuous force of the current, they were swept back; at others, suspended on the arched back of a descending wave, they struggled and laboured until they were again in the shelter of a friendly eddy. But the canoe, frail as she was, and too weak for the encounter of such rude shocks, was nevertheless threaded through the boiling rapids and sunken rocks with fearful elegance. The cool dexterity with which she was managed was truly admirable; not a "set" was missed....<sup>12</sup>

Back describes a "set" as "the firm fixing of the pole against the bottom of the river, and a false set has often occasioned the loss of a canoe."<sup>13</sup>

One of the most onerous tasks was portaging. The Portage La Loche, which separates the waters of the Mackenzie basin from those of the Hudson Bay, was the portage which presented the greatest trial of strength. One of the few accounts of crossing the portage is given by John Richardson. He states that the average load of the Canadian on a long portage was two 'pieces', each weighing ninety pounds, "and in shorter ones, often a greater load."<sup>14</sup> Each man was given an equal number of packs in addition to the boats and their equipment. The ordinary, i.e., expected, carry was two miles a day which, if each man carried five pieces, meant walking approximately twenty miles, ten of these with a load.<sup>15</sup> There were nine resting places along the portage. A discomfort which added to the miserable work on the portage is mentioned by Back,

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<sup>12</sup>G. Back, Narrative, pp. 66-67.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>J. Richardson, Arctic Searching Expedition, vol. 1, p. 111.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.





For about six or seven miles on this portage, the voyageurs are exposed to temporary but acute suffering, from the total absence of good water to quench the thirst, aggravated, in our case, by carrying loads of 200 lbs. in an atmosphere of 68° Fahrenheit.<sup>16</sup>

Horse-flies, or "bull-dogs", and mosquitoes also added to the misery of portaging.<sup>17</sup>

A successful journey was made possible through effective leadership,

... with so short a travelling season, every hour is of importance, and whoever has charge of a party must show that he thinks so, otherwise his men cannot be induced to keep up their exertions for sixteen hours a day, which is the usual period of labour in summer travelling.<sup>18</sup>

Richardson implies that without energetic leadership the common men often lacked the willingness or readiness to carry out their duties properly. In 1791 Philip Turnor reported that the North West Company men left their canoes and returned to the fort, having been forced by ice conditions to give up their journey. Roderick Mackenzie thereupon went with the men and hauled the canoe over the ice to the Slave River which was still open water.<sup>19</sup>

The voyageurs were very particular of their appearance upon arrival at the fort:

Sept. 19, 1820 - Landed at 6 PM in order to give our men time to wash their things as they are desirous to appear in good feather on their arrival at the fort.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>G. Back, Narrative, p. 70.

<sup>17</sup>J. Richardson, Arctic Searching Expedition, vol. 1, p. 99.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>19</sup>J. B. Tyrrell, Hearne and Turnor Journals, Oct. 14, 1791, p. 446.

<sup>20</sup>E. Rich (ed.), Simpson's Athabasca Journal, p. 49.





It was only the following day at the entrance to the lake that the men changed into clean clothes.<sup>21</sup> George Back, while voyaging inland to Chipewyan in 1833, gives a brief description of the finery and some unhappy results:

The crew had dressed themselves out in all their finery, - silver bands, tassels, and feathers in their hats, - intending to approach the station with some effect, but, unhappily for the poor fellows, the rain fell in torrents, their feathers drooped....<sup>22</sup>

When the brigade arrived at the fort, the officers, who had arrived earlier in a light canoe, immediately set to work unpacking, checking, and repacking the pieces for distribution to posts on the Peace and Mackenzie rivers.<sup>23</sup> The outfits for the most distant posts were the first ones despatched. The New Caledonia canoes left in early September, followed by Mackenzie River, Peace River, and Great Slave Lake brigades.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>G. Back, Narrative, p. 64, July 5, 1833, p. 64. Mr. Noel Mackay and Mr. Victor Mercredi of Fort Chipewyan can recall this custom was practised in the early years of the 20th century when the crews of the scows and sturgeon-heads arrived from Athabasca Landing. There is certainly a desire to appear in one's finest attire after gruelling days of paddling, insects, rain, and scorching sun, if only to show that the voyage was performed in a manner worthy of the hommes du nord.

<sup>23</sup>J. G. Tyrrell (ed.), Hearne and Turnor Journals, p. 446, Oct. 6, 1791. Nottingham House Journals, B 39/a/3, Sept. 22, 1803. E. Rich (ed.), Simpson's Athabasca Journal, p. 69, Sept. 30, 1820. Fort Chipewyan Journal, Alberta Provincial Library, Sept. 24, 1823.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.



The next important work of the officers was the outfitting of the Indians. After receiving their advances, they departed for their winter hunting grounds.<sup>25</sup>

While the officers were occupied with their responsibilities, the engagés also took up their fall duties. Many of the men were needed for voyaging with the canoes destined for the different districts mentioned above. The rest of the men were concerned in preparing for the long freeze of winter.

One duty which the men attended to was the preparation of the fort buildings for winter. The buildings were never of the best construction, especially in the early years of Fort Chipewyan. Unfortunately, no account of the south shore fort appears to have survived. In 1791 Malcolm Ross gives the size of the buildings which were constructed for the Turnor-Ross expedition,

Employed laying the foundation of the house which is 24 feet long by 15 feet wide, standing East and West; this is for Mr. Turnor and the rest of the people, Viz: - 10 foot partitioned off at the west end for Mr. Turnor, the remainder for the people. I also had another separate place 18 foot by 15 & stands N & south, with a door to the Westward - this latter place is for myself, a little goods, and provisions if I get any - 7 foot at the north and divided off for the warehouse or trading room,<sup>26</sup>

The method of constructing the buildings of fur trade posts is interesting since it does not follow the later practice in the United States. Building logs were squared at the corners for putting together.

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<sup>25</sup>Fort Chipewyan Post Journals, 1831-1834, B 39/a/29, Oct. 5, 1832.

<sup>26</sup>Journal of Malcolm Ross in Hearne and Turnor Journals, August 25, 1791, p. 442n.



The French Canadian technique was in common use and there is no reason to believe that the first forts at Chipewyan were any different. Some of the older buildings, in the settlement today, were constructed in this manner. Mr. Victor Mercredi, who was given the task of dismantling the fort in 1939, (a fort which was, incidentally, constructed in the 1870s for Chief Factor Roderick McFarlane) said poteaux sur sole was the method of construction in these buildings. In this type of construction, a framework of squared posts was first set up. These posts had grooves cut (known as tenons) in them to accommodate the squared logs. The logs had ends cut (mortices) to fit the grooves in the posts. Additional posts were placed for doorways and windows. At the centre of the end of each building a post extended to the height of the roof. A ridge pole was then laid on these two end posts and slab timbers were laid from the ridge pole to the eaves for the roof.<sup>27</sup> George Back, in his description of the house at Fort Reliance in 1833, says that the logs were plastered with a "cement composed of common clay and sand."<sup>28</sup> At Fort Chipewyan, the roofs were covered with clay, grass, sand - plastered over.<sup>29</sup> Pine bark, gathered by the men in early summer, was

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<sup>27</sup>For an excellent description of this method of building see the article by Marius Barbeau, "The House That Mac Built", in The Beaver, Outfit 276, December, 1945, pp. 10-13. Grace Lee Nute's The Voyageurs Highway, The Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, 1941. Appendix B contains a copy of a description of the technique by Reverend Sherman Hall in 1832.

<sup>28</sup>G. Back, Narrative, p. 205, Nov. 5, 1833.

<sup>29</sup>Fort Chipewyan Journal, Alberta Provincial Library, Aug. 30, 1823.





used to shingle the dwellings.<sup>30</sup> The pine bark, unlike cedar bark used in the Rainy Lake Country,<sup>31</sup> dries out quite readily; hence it was necessary to renew the covering of the houses every year if they were to be reasonably waterproof.<sup>32</sup> Priority was given to the stores and officers' dwellings:

... carting the remainder of the Pine bark up and if we have a sufficiency it is my intention to get the Men's houses covered to protect their property from spoiling from these leaky houses.<sup>33</sup>

The earliest description of Fort Chipewyan is in James Mackenzie's 1799 journal. The fort had been, by then, relocated on the north shore.<sup>34</sup> The number of buildings and their size cannot be determined. Mackenzie's account is rather querulous since he compares Fort Chipewyan to Mr. McLeod's fort at the forks of the Peace River:

At Mr. McLeod's fort, the men's houses are better arranged than the Bourgeois' houses here. The fort is built with 5 Bastions; Courtyards are made everywhere, a spacious garden made around the fort, a well, a powder House and even a S \_\_\_\_\_ House are made in this Garden. Here we have neither of these Conveniences - nor do we want any of them except the two most necessary vist ... a powder House and Hangard ... we don't presume to find fault with the Gentlemen who arranged Peace River fort ... but we do for leaving this for of greater Consequence so ill arranged....<sup>35</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., July 2, 1823.

<sup>31</sup> Nute, Grace Lee, op. cit., p. 57.

<sup>32</sup> Fort Chipewyan Post Journals, July 8, 1833, B 39/a/29.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., July 11, 1833.

<sup>34</sup> Vide, Chapter 2, The Forts and their Locations, pp. 8-10.

<sup>35</sup> Journal of James Mackenzie, P.A.C., April 16th, 1800.



From this comparison, it appears that Fort Chipewyan did not have bastions, courtyards, gardens, a well, or a powder magazine in 1799. The condition of the fort is revealed in the facetious remarks that the occupants were "in imminent danger of being squeezed to death by the fort Picketts [sic]" since "some were flat on the ground and several more are in doubt whether they should fall or not."<sup>36</sup> One could easily thrust a hand through the bark covering the hangards (warehouses) and the locks could be picked by a child. The occasion for Mackenzie's outburst had been that sparks from one of the men's houses had nearly set fire to the roof of the warehouse which housed the ammunition.<sup>37</sup>

The condition of this first fort on the north shore indicates that it was poorly planned and constructed. A possible reason may have been that the entry of competition into the Athabasca necessiated a hasty relocation of the fort.<sup>38</sup>

The best description of Fort Chipewyan was given in 1823 by James Keith.<sup>39</sup> This drawing, which is enclosed, shows the various houses were joined together in the traditional manner of fort building of that time. Of these buildings, the summer and winter house (#7), and the summer house depot would be the most important since these buildings

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

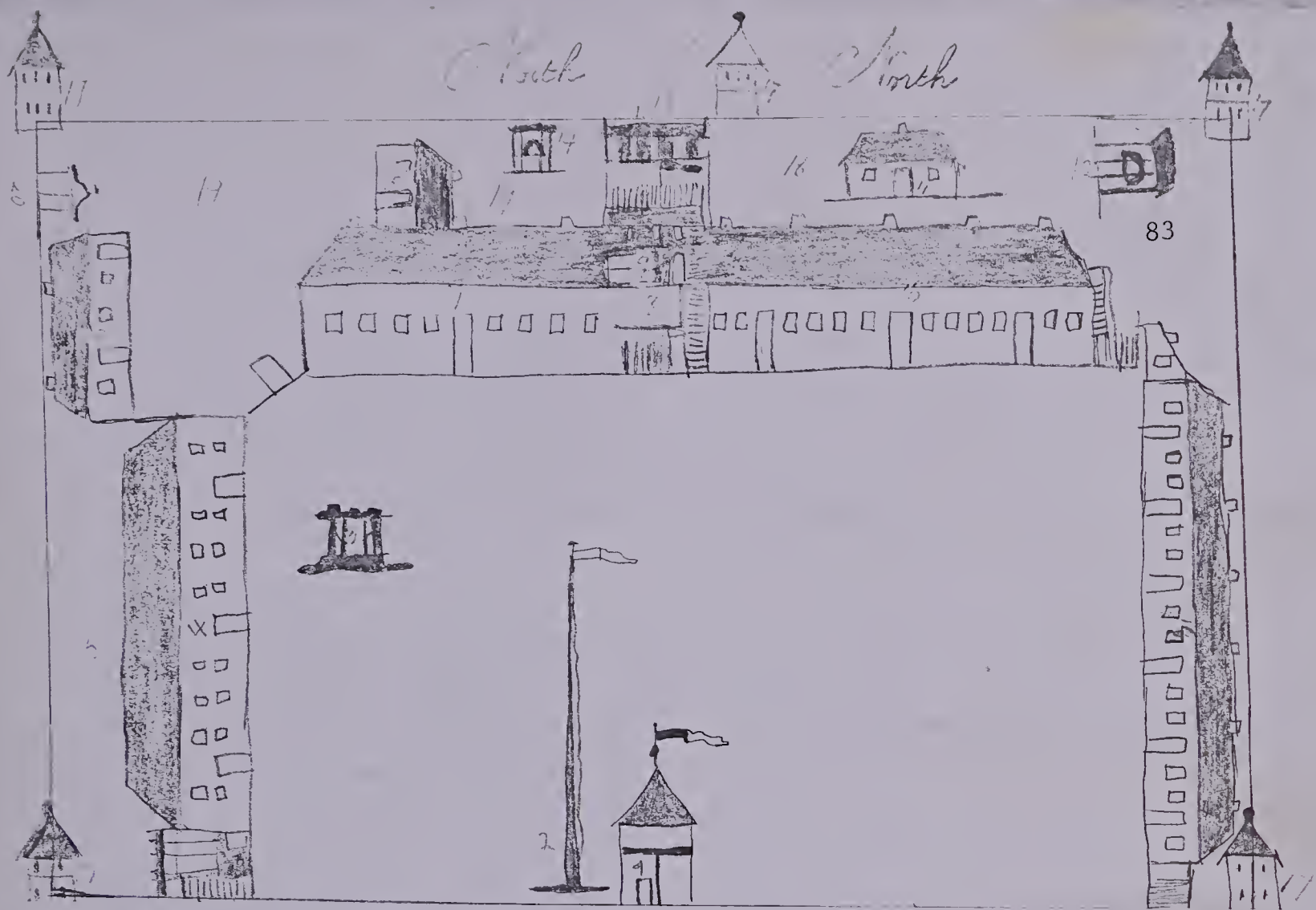
<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>Vide, Chapter 2, The Forts and Their Locations.

<sup>39</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1823-1824, B 39/e/6.







## References

- 1 Front Gates
- 2 Flag Staff
- 3 Pecking Press
- 4 Stores, with Ice Cellars
- 5 Powder magazine yard
- 6 Interpreter + Guides House
- 7 Ft Chipewyan Summer + Winter House
- 8 Covered Passage
- 9 Watch House + Observatory
- 10 Depot Summer House
- 11 do do do Kitchen
- 12 " " " Fish Oven
- 13 Lookout

- 14 Winter Fish Oven
- 15 Ft Chipewyan Kitchen
- 16 Mens Houses + Blacksmiths Shop.
- 17 Block Houses or Bastions
- 18 Summer Court + woodyard.
- 19 Winter do + do do
- 20 Side Gate

- 1 Boat Store
- 1 Canoe do
- 1 Stable
- 1 Dogs Kennel Yard.

are within the Fort





housed the officers and the trade goods. The summer and winter house contained the assembly hall which Henry Lefroy described in 1843 as being "the great feature of the houses in this country. Here the Indians assemble when at the fort, and here they live and sleep."<sup>40</sup> Unfortunately, Keith did not give any idea of the size of the buildings. William Brown, however, did give a graphic word description of Fort Wedderburn, which, from a present day survey of both sites, must have had approximately the dimensions of Fort Chipewyan.<sup>41</sup> At Fort Wedderburn the officer's house was 43' by 22', which was divided into a master's room, 12' by 22', a hall, 21' by 22' and two cabins, each 10' by 11'. These cabins were probably used by clerks. Brown mentioned that plans were being made to build another house to replace this which would be 86' by 24'. The store at Wedderburn, 57' by 19', was divided into a packing store of 21' by 19', a trading room, 18' by 19', and a provision store of 18' by 19'. The stores (#4) at Fort Chipewyan held provisions of fish, dried and fresh meat, pemmican, garden produce and trade goods.<sup>42</sup> The men's houses and blacksmith's shop (#16), located on the east wing, probably housed the carpenter's shop. At Fort Wedderburn the men's house, 40' by 18' was "divided by a partition, with a fire place in each division."<sup>43</sup> An

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<sup>40</sup>G. Stanley (ed.), Lefroy's Magnetic North, p. 84, Dec. 25, 1843.

<sup>41</sup>Brown gives the dimensions of Fort Wedderburn as 160 yards square. Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1820-1821, B 39/e/3, p. 20.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., The store was in need of repair in 1832, B 39/a/28, Feb. 29, 1832.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.



older men's quarters had housed the blacksmith's shop. A new building, 36' by 14' contained a carpenter's shop of 16' by 14', and "two rooms of ten feet by fourteen feet each - both of which are well calculated for officers who have families."<sup>44</sup> These measurements indicate the quarters for family living were quite small. The condition of Fort Chipewyan was remarked upon by Brown in 1820:

The buildings originally have been well executed, but they are decaying very fast, and they do not appear to be at much trouble in repairing them.<sup>45</sup>

George Simpson reported that Fort Chipewyan

... is a magnificent Establishment compared with this [Fort Wedderburn], and if there was no other reason for improving the Fort than to give it the appearance of respectability in the eyes of the Indians, material alterations and improvements are necessary on that account, as exterior [sic] and show have a wonderful effect on the savage race.<sup>46</sup>

The run-down condition of the fort can be directly attributed to the lack of time during competition to keep the buildings in good repair. It was only after the amalgamation in 1821 that trade practices allowed the repair and rebuilding of the fort.<sup>47</sup> By October 19, 1823 the powder magazine had been rebuilt<sup>48</sup> and a new canoe store was built the same

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

<sup>46</sup>E. Rich (ed.), Simpson's Athabasca Journal, p. 361.

<sup>47</sup>Fort Chipewyan Journal, Alberta Provincial Library, April 28, Oct. 16, Nov. 24, 1823.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., Oct. 19, 23, 1823.



autumn. New stockades were completed in the summer of 1822.<sup>49</sup> The fort was improved upon piece-meal fashion during the 1820s, a possible result of the policy to reduce the number of engagés employed at the fort. In 1824<sup>50</sup> the factors complained of the want of hands to carry out assignments, especially voyaging duties.

In 1828 plans were made to begin new buildings.<sup>51</sup> Although some work was carried out,<sup>52</sup> Chief Factor Stewart, on his arrival from York Factory, remarked:

I must confess the appearance of this place, gave very little proof of much improvement in the summer a circumstance commonly the result of sudden changes of managers.<sup>53</sup>

He subsequently ordered some repairs "in the Fort, which is falling in all directions."<sup>54</sup> The fort remained in need of major repair until the fall of 1832 when Chief Factor John Charles stated at length:

... we began to take part of the summer house, for the north end of it is within a few feet of T. Hodgson's chimney ... as well as the Fire place of the Blacksmith's forge and when the wind happens to be northeasterly the

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., July 9, 1822.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., May 3, 1824.

<sup>51</sup>Fort Chipewyan Post Journals, B 39/a/27, May 5, 1828.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., June 11 and July 2, 1828.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., Sept. 30, 1828. Generally summer was an ideal time for building construction. The amount of progress, however, depended upon the initiative of the summer manager. Undoubtedly the failure of gardens can also be attributed, at least partly, to the lack of attention by the post manager.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., Oct. 3, 1828.





sparks from the chimneys beat direct against the end of the House ... intend to take down two rooms from the Old Summer Establishment which will shorten it by 30 feet and leave an open space that will prevent any apprehensions in the future. In short the whole establishment requires renewing, if we could only get it done, but with other Duty that must absolutely be attended to, unless we had more people it is unlikely, that much will be done towards it for some time to come....<sup>55</sup>

A house of 50' by 20' was constructed in 1833.<sup>56</sup> A store of 40' by 20' was built in 1832<sup>57</sup> and another 50' by 20' was being prepared in 1834.<sup>58</sup> The bastions, which served as lookouts during the times of conflict, were relegated to roles of lesser importance after the amalgamation:

... four men began to make two Bastions as they call them, but not for Defence on the contrary for the Purpose of securing their fish after having been served out to them from the Dogs....<sup>59</sup>

Apparently, the main buildings of the fort were reconstructed in the 1830s. The drawing shows that the stores (#40) were a two storied structure, possibly because the upper part was used to keep dried provisions. Although the sketch is not drawn to scale, it displays what seem to be a large number of windows in all the main houses. Whether these windows were necessary for light, or whether they only existed in the wishful imagination of Mr. Keith, the artist, is not certain. Henry Lefroy comments on the windows in his description of the fort in 1843:

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<sup>55</sup>Fort Chipewyan Post Journals, B 39/a/29, Oct. 9, 1832.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., April 5, 1833.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., B 39/a/28, April 5, 1832.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., B 39/a/29, March 25, 1834.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., B 39/a/28, May 3, 1832.



It is a square area, fenced by high palisades, and containing low one-storied buildings on three sides. Nearly all of them display nothing but parchment windows which have particularly cheerless look, as you will imagine if you consider for a moment what it would be like to get all your light through a drumhead. They do in reality give a good deal of light.<sup>60</sup>

Lefroy also mentioned that all the houses, except those of the officers, had parchment. Presumably then, the officer's rooms had glass windows.

Lefroy stayed in a room twelve feet square which was furnished with the barest of essentials, i.e., table, chair, "and a rickety old construction of a cupboard made in former days by some luxurious clerk."<sup>61</sup> Although the officers had some comforts, the furnishings were barely adequate, especially in the early years at the fort. James Mackenzie recorded on August 18, 1799,

Laviollette finished the Chair - I may be found fault with for employing a man in the Summer to make such a triffling [sic] thing as a chair but I cannot help it for I was in want of one and could not write without it.<sup>62</sup>

The rooms were plastered and whitewashed.<sup>63</sup> The officers had a bedstead<sup>64</sup> and Mr. Keith had a writing desk made for himself.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>60</sup>G. Stanley (ed.), Lefroy's Magnetic North, pp. 66-67, Dec. 13, 1843.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>62</sup>Journal of James Mackenzie, P.A.C., Aug. 28, 1799.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., Aug. 16, 1799; Fort Chipewyan Journal, Alberta Provincial Library, Nov. 11, 1823.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., Nov. 13, 1823.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., Sept. 5, 1823.



The houses were described as being very warm, "the Fires we indulge in would almost warm a barn."<sup>66</sup> Many of the chimneys had double fireplaces, i.e., one chimney served two fireplaces in rooms separated by a partition. The chimneys were constructed in much the same manner as the one which David Thompson described at Saleesh House:

... Our Chimneys were made of stone and mud rudely worked in for about six feet in height and eighteen inches thick, the rest of the layers of grass and mud worked around small poles inserted in the stone work, with cross pieces and thus carried up to about four feet above the roof; the fireplace is raised a little, and three to four feet in width by about fifteen inches in depth.<sup>67</sup>

By the time of Lefroy's visit, the buildings were better constructed to hold the heat and certainly more adequate supplies of firewood were collected. Provision of firewood was a task of the engagés, and the quota that a man was required to cut increased from three cords in 1799<sup>68</sup> to twenty-five cords in 1829.<sup>69</sup> The increase in quota is an indication of the increase in the size of the fort.

To supplement the main diet of fish, which was discussed in chapter three, horticulture was first attempted with a modest degree of success at Peter Pond's fort on the Athabaska River.<sup>70</sup> This garden was very likely maintained until the change of fort sites in 1788. It is doubtful

<sup>66</sup>G. Stanley (ed.), Lefroy's Magnetic North, p. 94.

<sup>67</sup>R. Glover (ed.), Thompson's Narrative, p. 297.

<sup>68</sup>Journal of James Mackenzie, P.A.C., Dec. 21, 1799.

<sup>69</sup>Fort Chipewyan Post Journals, 1828-1829, B 39/a/27, April 7, 1829.

<sup>70</sup>J. Garvin (ed.), Mackenzie's Voyages, p. 246.





whether the North West Company had a garden at the south shore fort. Philip Turnor did not mention one in 1791; Roderick Mackenzie, however, remained inland during some of the summers,<sup>71</sup> and he may have attempted gardening. The size and success of gardens depended upon the number of men spending the summer inland since gardens required close attention. James Mackenzie does not mention gardens in his 1799 journal. Peter Fidler laid out a garden in 1803 on English Island which, in one season, only yielded one bushel of turnips and ten gallons of potatoes from five gallons of seed.<sup>72</sup> Fidler remarked, "the sterility of the Ground & the cold climate" were obstacles to successful gardening.<sup>73</sup> During periods of competition gardens were exposed to the additional hazard of wanton destruction.<sup>74</sup> It is questionable whether the Northwesters ever attempted extensive gardening at Fort Chipewyan. Simpson stated they "pay little or no attention to horticulture in this District."<sup>75</sup> Simpson did not say, however, that they neglected gardens where they could be successfully cultivated. He stated in his report that the North West Company:

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<sup>71</sup>J. B. Tyrrell (ed.), Hearne and Turnor Journals, p. 397.

<sup>72</sup>Nottingham House Journals, 1803-1804, B 39/a/3, Oct. 10, 1803.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., Sept. 16, 1803.

<sup>74</sup>Fidler's garden was destroyed by North West men in 1805. Ibid., B 39/a/5, Sept. 11, 1805.

<sup>75</sup>E. Rich (ed.), Simpson's Athabasca Journal, p. 364.



... (who evince great ability in all their plans and arrangements and avail themselves of every advantage the Country affords) derive great benefit from this source, at Dunvegan, Vermillion, & Fort de Pinnette they have very extensive Gardens which are of the most essential importance to them; last Fall it was particularly exemplified, when the Peace River brigade arrived at Fort Chipewyan, they had no provisions for the remainder of the Voyage, and waited the arrival of a Canoe load of Potatoes from Vermillion which maintained the people until they arrived at their destinations.<sup>76</sup>

Potatoes, turnips, and barley (and occasionally peas and onions) were usually planted.<sup>77</sup> The short growing season meant that ideal growing conditions had to prevail. The gardens were rarely planted before the first of June and frost can strike any time after mid-August.<sup>78</sup> The sandy soil was a drawback, and if there was a prolonged absence of rain, the gardens seldom succeeded. Some prosperous gardens in the mid-1820s led John Franklin to remark "the tables of the officers being supplied daily, and those of the men frequently, with potatoes and barley."<sup>79</sup> During Franklin's visit, a fall planting of barley was made but the results were disappointing.<sup>80</sup> The failure of the gardens in

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 80, Oct. 13, 1820.

<sup>77</sup> Fort Chipewyan Journal, Alberta Provincial Library, Aug. 5, 1823.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., June 3, 1823; Fort Chipewyan Post Journals, 1831-1834, B 39/a/29, June 1, 1832.

<sup>79</sup> Franklin, John, Narrative of a Second Expedition to the Shores of the Polar Sea, in the years 1825, 1826, and 1827 Including an Account of the Progress of a Detachment to the Eastward, by John Richardson, J. Murray, London, 1828, p. 305. Hereafter referred to as J. Franklin, Second Expedition.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 307.



1832 and 1833 indicate the uncertainties of gardening throughout the early years of Fort Chipewyan.<sup>81</sup>

When there was a good harvest, there was the problem of keeping the vegetables during the winter. Most of the 1831 harvest was reported spoiled in May.<sup>82</sup> The meagre 1832 crop became exposed to frost and in order that some potatoes might be saved for the table, an early technique of freezing vegetables was used:

... therefore took them out of the cellar, & put them in one of the empty rooms that they may freeze purposefully, for if we leave them to freeze and thaw they will be useless, but by putting them froze into boiling water & cooking them at once they are still eatable.<sup>83</sup>

The necessity of preserving food reflected the capacity of the Canadians for consuming it:

... it is well known that all frenchmen [sic] are more active in their Employers [sic] cause with a full than an Empty Belly - To keep the frenchmen in good humour their chops now and then must be greased -<sup>84</sup>

In the early years of the fort, and during food shortages, it was the practice to send all extra men out to the fisheries to support themselves.<sup>85</sup> Although the people remaining at the fort were allotted daily rations,

<sup>81</sup>Fort Chipewyan Post Journals, 1831-1834, B 39/a/29, Sept. 28, 1833. See also G. Back, Narrative, pp. 464-465.

<sup>82</sup>Fort Chipewyan Post Journals, 1831-1832, B 39/a/28, May 3, 1832.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., 1831-1834, B 39/a/29, Dec. 27, 1832.

<sup>84</sup>Journal of James Mackenzie, P.A.C., July 31, 1800.

<sup>85</sup>Supra, Chapter three, p. 4.





those living at the fishery fended for themselves. It was either feast or famine. On December 4, 1799, three men ate twenty-three whitefish and a "Dishful of pounded meat & grease."<sup>86</sup> The consumption of food in the men's homes was also described:

In Labris house there are 5 Men, a woman and 3 Children, in La Bicasses's house there are 3 Men and 3 Women, and L'Espagnol's there are two Men and 2 Women - In the first of these Houses they eat about 35 Whitefish every day - in the second 20 do and in the last about 15 do - All these they devour in three Meals and Sometimes only one - but that is regulated by the Surfeits they take....<sup>87</sup>

Richardson said in 1833 that boiling the fish was the usual method of cooking them, "so as to form an excellent white soup; but is extremely good when fried, and especially if enveloped in batter."<sup>88</sup> Carp were used to make soup, and eggs of the methy fish made good bread cakes.<sup>89</sup>

Meat - fresh, dried, and pounded - was issued when the fisheries failed.<sup>90</sup> In 1824, the men received meat on Sundays, and the wood cutters were given three days meat rations instead of two every week.<sup>91</sup> Richard King said that moose, of all the varieties of fresh meat, was the tastiest because of the softness of the fat. A depouille was the

<sup>86</sup> Journal of James Mackenzie, P.A.C., Dec. 4, 1700.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., Nov. 20, 1799.

<sup>88</sup> J. Richardson's Zoological Notes in G. Back, Narrative, p. 519.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 521.

<sup>90</sup> Fort Chipewyan Journal, Alberta Provincial Library, Nov. 19, 1823.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., Jan. 17, 1824; Jan. 24, 1824.



portion of fat, three to six inches thick, which lay next to the skin along the back and rump.<sup>92</sup> These layers of fat were "stripped from the carcass, dipped in hot grease, and hung up in the lodge to dry and smoke before they were ready to be eaten."<sup>93</sup> A depouille served as a substitute for bread.<sup>94</sup> The buffalo and the moose were valued for depouille (King said it was best in a male moose in October).<sup>95</sup> The nose and tongue of the caribou, moose, and buffalo were considered as great delicacies.<sup>96</sup>

Flour was a scarce article and bannock or galette was a rare treat.<sup>97</sup>

The bannock is simply flour and water and grease thoroughly kneaded and well-baked; the usual method of cooking is to shape the dough an inch deep to the inside of a frying pan, and stand the latter before the camp-fire.<sup>98</sup>

Flour, when available, was used in rubbaboo, which was pemmican boiled in water to make a soup. A touch of sugar added to the palatability of the mixture.<sup>99</sup>

<sup>92</sup>R. King, Narrative, vol. 1, p. 152.

<sup>93</sup>C. Gates (ed.), Five Fur Traders, p. 155n.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid.

<sup>95</sup>R. King, Narrative, vol. 1, p. 152.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid., p. 197. See also G. Stanley (ed.), Lefroy's Magnetic North, p. 69.

<sup>97</sup>G. Stanley (ed.), Lefroy's Magnetic North, p. 69.

<sup>98</sup>Whitney, Caspar, On Snow-Shoes to the Barren Grounds, Osgood, McIlvaine & Co., London, 1896, p. 55.

<sup>99</sup>Kennicott's "Journal", p. 85.



James Keith outlined the daily rations for the fort in 1826:

The regular rations of a man on fish is 5 white fish or fresh meat 8-10 [lbs] p diem, conjoined the first part of the winter with 2 lb potatoes on Sundays, afterwards augmented to twice and lastly to thrice that quantity p week,  $\frac{1}{4}$  that allowance for a woman and  $\frac{1}{4}$  for a child. Each dog 2 fish p diem when employed....<sup>100</sup>

The officers' mess was supplemented by special allowances of butter, sugar, tea, chocolate, pepper, cured ham, Madeira wine, and molasses.<sup>101</sup>

The diet was also varied by gathering the eggs of wild birds.<sup>102</sup> Wild berries were collected by the women. In the spring of each year the women collected the sap of birch trees, "for the purpose of making a sirup [sic] used as a substitute for sugar, of which they are extravagantly fond."<sup>103</sup> In 1834, a cow and a calf were shipped by boat from Peace River to Fort Chipewyan "and thereby supplied us with luxuries till then untasted at Chipewyan."<sup>104</sup>

<sup>100</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1825-1826, B 39/e/9, p. 8. Keith carefully worked out the daily expenses of feeding each person:

Officers' mess: 1s.2d.

Officers' families: 2 2/3d.

Engages: 4d.

Engages' families: 1 2/3d.

Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1824-1825, B 39/e/8, p. 27.

<sup>101</sup>Ibid.

<sup>102</sup>Fort Chipewyan Journal, Alberta Provincial Library, June 14, 1823.

<sup>103</sup>G. Back, Narrative, p. 464, May, 1834.

<sup>104</sup>Ibid., p. 465, May 23, 1834. See also R. King, Narrative, vol. 2, p. 212, June 10, 1834. Lefroy reported half a dozen head in 1843; G. Stanley (ed.), Lefroy's Magnetic North, p. 85.





Conditions of starvation, however, were not unknown. Although the policy was to send men to support themselves at the fisheries or by going en derouine with Indian bands,<sup>105</sup> Simpson reported that the people were "literally starving about the Lake living chiefly on Rock weed; 30 Dollars was given for a dog the other day at the Old Fort which was consumed at one scanty meal."<sup>106</sup> In 1823, Edward Smith reported, "several of the Company's dogs missing. Must have been eaten by the men in the spring."<sup>107</sup>

With survival the objective of the men, their character made discipline a difficult task.<sup>108</sup> Richardson recounted the case of an old voyageur who bet his entire salary that his dogs, "poor and lean as they were," would travel to Fort Chipewyan in less time than the others. His confident manner came from the fact,

... that the voyagers of the Athabasca department consider themselves as very superior to any other. The only reasons he could assign were: that they had borne their burdens across the terrible Methye Portage, and that they were accustomed to live harder and more precariously.<sup>109</sup>

Back related how one Canadian was embarrassed by frost-bite, "for there is a pride amongst 'Old Voyagers' which makes them consider the state

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<sup>105</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1820-1821, B 39/e/3, p. 6.

<sup>106</sup>E. Rich (ed.), Simpson's Athabasca Journal, p. 319, April 23, 1821.

<sup>107</sup>Fort Chipewyan Journal, Alberta Provincial Library, June 26, 1822.

<sup>108</sup>Supra, p. 5.

<sup>109</sup>J. Richardson in J. Franklin, Narrative, p. 216, March, 1820.



of being frost-bitten as effeminate, and only excusable in a 'Pork-eater' or one newly come into the country."<sup>110</sup> John Franklin had to threaten his men with severe punishment:

... having learned from the gentlemen, most intimately acquainted with the character of the Canadian voyagers, that they invariably try how far they can impose upon every new master with whom they may serve, and that they will continue to be disobedient and intractable if they once gain any ascendancy [sic] over him.<sup>111</sup>

Mackenzie also spoke of the improvidence of the Canadians, "who rival the savages in a neglect of the morrow."<sup>112</sup> The physical and mental toughness made the Canadian men, in spite of their faults, a class of workers able to endure the hardships of fort life. Orkneymen were regarded, however, as better fishermen because they took care of their nets and the fish which they caught.<sup>113</sup> Although James Keith thought that Orkneymen would be better boatmen than the Canadians, he concluded that they were not suited to long summer voyages and the irregular routine of winter, "Jean Baptiste therefore with all his peculiarities, capricious leanings ... must constitute our principal Physical prop...."<sup>114</sup>

Although the hours of work were long, there was time for some leisure activities. During the North West Company period, Fort Chipewyan was noted for its library. Roderick Mackenzie had begun the library but

<sup>110</sup>G. Back in J. Franklin, Narrative, vol. 2, pp. 68-69, Dec. 28.

<sup>111</sup>Ibid., vol. 1, p. 339, Aug. 13, 1820.

<sup>112</sup>J. Garvin (ed.), Mackenzie's Voyages, p. 95n.

<sup>113</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1820-1821, B 39/e/3, p. 2.

<sup>114</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1825-1826, B 39/e/9, p. 8.





in 1814 Ferdinand Wentzell reported that "scarcely a complete set of books can be found."<sup>115</sup> Nevertheless thirty-six years later Henry Lefroy found "many sound books of history and general literature."<sup>116</sup> Colin Robertson read five volumes of Shakespeare's works during his imprisonment in Fort Chipewyan in 1818-1819.<sup>117</sup>

The officers often took up hunting for a pastime, especially in the spring and fall when geese and ducks were plentiful.<sup>118</sup> Lefroy noted that, during the winter, "a sort of dreamy inactivity takes the place of other enjoyments."<sup>119</sup> He described his daily routine:

We breakfast at 9, tea and moose steaks, after breakfast I go to the observy.... Sometimes I join them at dinner, which invariably consists of whitefish au naturel, i.e., without bread, sauce or vegetable. Supper the same as breakfast, except that at the latter we enjoy the additional luxury of potatoes, not at the other. After tea I play chess for a couple of hours....<sup>120</sup>

The arrival of a visitor was an occasion of festivity:

Flag staff shaped with new flag and the same was saluted with a few shots from a small cannon. We intended this ceremony for the arrival of our friends from below. They disappointed us by arriving at night.<sup>121</sup>

<sup>115</sup>L. Masson, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 109, Wentzell's Letters, dated Mackenzie River, Feb. 28, 1814.

<sup>116</sup>G. Stanley (ed.), Lefroy's Magnetic North, p. 170.

<sup>117</sup>Fort Chipewyan Post Journals, 1818-1819, B 39/a/14.

<sup>118</sup>Fort Chipewyan Journal, Alberta Provincial Library, Sept. 19, 1822.

<sup>119</sup>G. Stanley (ed.), Lefroy's Magnetic North, p. 89.

<sup>120</sup>Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>121</sup>Fort Chipewyan Journal, Alberta Provincial Library, Aug. 26, 1822.





Dances were also a means of providing entertainment in the off hours.<sup>122</sup> Certain holidays were customarily observed; November 1, All Saints day was set aside for the men and, of course, Christmas and New Year's festivities were never missed. During these times the celebrations often continued for a week or more when liquor was allowed.<sup>123</sup> New Year's day usually commenced with the firing of guns and then the men were treated to brandy and cakes.<sup>124</sup> John Charles estimated the expenses for New Year's, 1832:

81 lbs Grease 56 lbs D Meat 257 Fresh Meat 29 quarts  
barley 50 B Meat [beat or pounded meat] 4½ Kegs Potatoes  
& each of these Men got a Pipe & 2 feet tobacco.<sup>125</sup>

Charles had, according to his custom, smuggled in some rum, which undoubtedly added to the hilarity.

The custom of Indian marriages not only provided men, isolated from the comforts of European civilization, with the companionship of mates and the comforts of family life, but also gave the rest of the fort an excuse for a celebration. George Simpson gave an entertaining account of the events which led up to the "treat":

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<sup>122</sup>Ibid., June 7, 1823.

<sup>123</sup>Ibid., Nov. 1, 1822.

<sup>124</sup>Fort Chipewyan Post Journals, 1831-1834, B 39/a/29, Jan. 1, 1833.

<sup>125</sup>Ibid., 1831-1832, B 39/a/28, Jan. 1, 1832. Twist tobacco was tobacco leaves twisted into long ropes. It was given out by measurement; 6 feet of tobacco weighed about 3/4 of a pound. Cf. C. Gates, Five Fur Treaders, p. 129n.



Mr. Greill alleges that the object of his present visit is to receive a supply of goods, I am not however inclined to give him credit for all the merit he claims, in having performed a four days journey in two and a half alone, and at this season of the year, out of pure zeal in the cause of his employers, and he at length admits that Cupid in some measure prompted him in the undertaking; the fact is, that he came to reclaim a frail fair one, who during his absence at the Depot, put herself under the protection of Mr. Brown; each Gentleman advanced powerful claims to the Prize, it was at length agreed through my suggestion, that the Lady should be permitted to take her choice, and after some consideration she cast a sheeps [sic] towards the Veteran, who in the evening gave a treat to the people as customary on such felicitous events.<sup>126</sup>

James Mackenzie made a clear distinction between some of the women at the fort in his remark, "when I say the Ladies I do not include the Men's women - these are not Ladies but Trollops."<sup>127</sup> John Charles could not help remarking on the looseness of some of the women's morals in 1832,

... some of the women in the summer furnish ammunition to these fellows to kill Ducks for them, and at the same time take occasional excursions with them in their canoes; the rest may be guessed at.<sup>128</sup>

In an effort to improve standards of conduct, Sundays were set aside for observance of the sabbath in 1823.<sup>129</sup> Some of the men, however,

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<sup>126</sup>E. Rich (ed.), Simpson's Athabasca Journal, p. 88, Oct. 20, 1820.

<sup>127</sup>Journal of James Mackenzie, P.A.C., July 28, 1800.

<sup>128</sup>Fort Chipewyan Posts Journals, 1831-1834, B 39/a/29, Nov. 14, 1832.

<sup>129</sup>R. Fleming (ed.), Minutes of Northern Council, p. 60, July 5, 1823, Resolution 153.



did not comply with the new regulations (which had been read and posted), consequently their rations were withdrawn for one day.<sup>130</sup>

While a successful trade depended on the men who served at Fort Chipewyan, they were not the only factor. Profits also depended upon the readiness of the Indians to hunt furs.

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<sup>130</sup>Fort Chipewyan Journal, Alberta Provincial Library, Nov. 30, 1823.





## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE INDIANS, FORT CHIPEWYAN, AND THE METHODS OF TRADE

Whether trade at Fort Chipewyan was conducted under conditions of monopoly or competition had a great effect upon the lives of the Indians. Because they were the decisive factors in a successful trade, they merit a close study. The significance of the Indians can be established by examining some of their cultural traits which permitted the fur trader to develop trading methods which would appeal to them. Therefore their physical environment was important. Samuel Hearne gave an account of these Northern Indians<sup>1</sup> which is still one of the best descriptions available.<sup>2</sup> His travels with the Chipewyan provides a glimpse at a society which, apart from trade habits, was largely unaffected by European culture. In an effort to make more profitable returns, the fur trader sought and devised ways of trading which exploited the Indians' manner of living. The purpose of this chapter is to show the dependence of trade at the fort upon the Indians.

The establishment of Fort Chipewyan wrought changes in the lives of the Chipewyans. It is the reaction of the Indians to the fort that warrants study. The essential objective of the traders was to develop trading methods which would make profitable returns. These trade methods included the giving of presents, the creation of 'chiefs', the

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<sup>1</sup>The term Northern Indians referred to the Chipewyans. R. Glover (ed.), Thompson's Narrative, p. 105.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. E. Rich, History, vol. 2, p. 56. R. Glover (ed.), Hearne's Journeys, p. xxix.



use of liquor, and various other means which exploited the Indians' culture. These methods differed according to the times of monopoly and competition. The trade habits of the Chipewyans were also affected by health, superstition, and wars with other nations. An epidemic of sickness and deaths over a prolonged period had the effect of disrupting the entire trading system.

The geographical position of the widely dispersed Chipewyans<sup>3</sup> was described by Alexander Mackenzie as lying between latitudes 60 degrees and 65 degrees North, and longitudes 100 degrees and 110 degrees West.<sup>4</sup> Samuel Hearne said their boundaries extended from 59 degrees to 68 degrees North latitude, and from the Hudson Bay coast 500 miles westward. Their lands were known as the barren grounds,<sup>5</sup> although the southern boundary was the Churchill River.<sup>6</sup> According to Diamond Jenness, their original lands were around Churchill before 1689. He attributes their dispersion to the coming of the fur trade.<sup>7</sup> A. S. Morton said that the Chipewyans were driven to the barren grounds by the Crees in the

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<sup>3</sup>They called themselves Tinne. They were called 'Chepawyans' by the Crees, which meant pointed skins "from the manner in which they dry the Beaver skins." R. Glover (ed.), Thompson's Narrative, p. 105.

<sup>4</sup>J. Garvin (ed.), Mackenzie's Voyages, pp. 119-120.

<sup>5</sup>J. Richardson, Arctic Searching Expedition, pp. 4-5.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>7</sup>D. Jenness, "The Indian Background of Canadian History," National Museum of Canada, Bulletin No. 86, p. 36.



eighteenth century.<sup>8</sup> The development of the Indian middleman trading organization was probably also a cause.<sup>9</sup> The extent of their lands gave the Chipewyans an advantage which other tribes did not have,

... they can never be rendered dependant [sic], much less become stationary ... as many of the other Indian tribes, from the obvious circumstance of having their lands to resort to when caprice or necessity prompt them retiring thither.<sup>10</sup>

The Chipewyan followed the enormous caribou herds in their seasonal journeys across the barrens.<sup>11</sup> This permitted them, if they wished, to act independently of the European trader. Hearne noted that the Indian method of hunting animals by capturing them in pounds was so successful that it caused:

... a habitual indolence in the young and active, who frequently spend a whole Winter in this indolent manner: and as those parts of the country are almost destitute of every animal of the furr [sic] kind, it cannot be supposed that those who indulge themselves in this indolent method of procuring food can be masters of anything for trade....<sup>12</sup>

Hearne was the first to notice that as a result of the fur trade there were two groups of Chipewyan Indians. One group, the fur traders,

<sup>8</sup>A. S. Morton, History, p. 12.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 289.

<sup>10</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1824-1825, B 39/e/8, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup>For a complete discussion of the barren ground caribou and their migratory habits see: C.H.D. Clarke, "A Biological Investigation of the Thelon Game Sanctuary," National Museum of Canada, Bulletin No. 96, pp. 84-112.

<sup>12</sup>R. Glover (ed.), Hearne's Journeys, p. 51.





were "the more industrious" since they travelled to Churchill to trade furs for trade goods. After the establishment of Fort Chipewyan these more industrious Indians moved to the country between Great Slave and Athabaska lakes because it harbored many fur-bearing animals. The fort made trade goods more easily available. No longer did they have to undertake the arduous trip to Hudson Bay:

... one half of the inhabitants, and perhaps the other half also, are frequently in danger of being starved to death ... most of these scenes of distress happen during their journies to and from Prince of Wales's Fort....<sup>13</sup>

The journey of five or six months was only undertaken when "necessity obliges them."<sup>14</sup>

Philip Turnor also mentioned that the Indians,

... all agree that they are well used at Churchill and get plenty for their furs [sic] but that the distance is so very great that it fatigues them very much occasions great loss of time that they live very hard upon the journey and frequently many of them starve to death particularly if they go in winter and if they go in Summer they have a great number of rivers to pass near the factory the crossing of which puts them to great inconvenience and they do not know the way by the rivers as untill [sic] within this few years the Indians that inhabit the low countries was [sic] at war with them which obliged them to take a more Northern rout [sic] and instead of navigating the rivers only to cross them....<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp. 212-213.

<sup>14</sup> J. B. Tyrrell (ed.), Hearne and Turnor Journals, p. 450.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 450-451.



A winter journey thus involved a distinct possibility of starvation, since their chief source of food, the caribou, moved south and west from the barren grounds into forest protection at the onset of cold weather. Travel during the summer was difficult because the Chipewyans only made use of canoes to ford streams and rivers.<sup>16</sup> Nor were these canoes suitable for navigation of any distance since,

... two persons, one of whom always lies down at full length for fear of making the canoe top-heavy, and the other sits on his heels and paddles.<sup>17</sup>

Simpson noted the effect of the trade on the Chipewyans:

... they shook off their indolent habits, became expert Beaver hunters, and now penetrate in search of that valuable animal into the Cree and Beaver hunting Grounds, making a circuit easterly by Carribeau Lake; to the South by Isle a la Crosse; and Westerly to the Bank of Peace River.... The greater proportion of them however remain on their own barren lands, where they procure sustenance with little exertion as the Country abounds with Rein Deer, and some years nearly the whole of them resort thither, at times influenced by superstitious feelings, and others by having laid up what they consider an abundant Stock of European articles (being very provident) in order to indulge in ease and Luxury....<sup>18</sup>

It is obvious then, that those who remained on their lands had a much easier life than those who took up trapping. Hearne noted with disgust that "ambition never leads them to anything beyond the means of procuring food and clothing."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>R. Glover (ed.), Hearne's Journeys, p. 24.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>18</sup>E. Rich (ed.), Simpson's Athabasca Journal, pp. 355-356.

<sup>19</sup>R. Glover (ed.), Hearne's Journeys, p. 51.



This second group became known as 'caribou eaters'.<sup>20</sup> Since they tended to remain on their lands, they were of less economic value to the fur trade. The concern of management at Fort Chipewyan was to encourage more of the Caribou Eaters to take up trapping and thus frequent the trading post. Peter Fidler saw the problem in 1804:

... few Indians are about & what has been in have all gone directly for their lands to the Eastward & will not be in before next November and then will have little or nothing in with them as all that country is destitute of Beaver - abounding only in Deer, the Skins of which they require to make their Winters rigging of....<sup>21</sup>

In 1825, James Keith, although anxious to reduce the number of Indians about the fort, did not want to see them return to their lands: "Others talk of going to their lands, at which I Pretend the most perfect indifference, conceiving it the most effectual mode of preventing them...."<sup>22</sup> Some of them did, however, and as a result the returns of 1826 were less.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Fort Chipewyan Post Journals, 1831-1834, B 39/a/29, Oct. 6, 1833. Guy H. Blanchet made mention of this group in 1926:

"These people seldom visit the posts, but spend they year in the upper plateau, moving out to meet the caribou in the late summer and returning down-stream after the spring break-up to the good fish lakes.... The camps of the Caribou Eaters are truly pleasant places, set with an eye to beauty in a beautiful country. Their seasonal drift is through picturesque and excellent waterways by which, if they wish, all parts of the plateau may be reached."

G. H. Blanchet, "New Light on Forgotten Trails in the Far Northwest," The Canadian Field-Naturalist, vol. 40, April and May issues, 1926, pp. 69-75, 96-99.

<sup>21</sup>Nottingham House Journals, 1803-1804, B 39/a/3, March 13, 1804.

<sup>22</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1824-1825, B 39/e/8, p. 6.

<sup>23</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1825-1826, B 39/e/9, p. 8.





Fortunately for the fur traders, the Chipewyan Indians had other traits which assisted them in making good returns. The most important of these was their timid, peaceable nature:

... let their affronts or losses be ever so great, they will never seek any other revenge than that of wrestling. As for murder, which is so common among all the tribes of Southern Indians, is seldom heard of in them....<sup>24</sup>

As a result of the mild behavior of the Indians, the fur traders were able to take advantage of them. The Chipewyans paid

... little regard to private property ... and take every advantage of bodily strength to rob their neighbours, not only of their goods, but of their wives....<sup>25</sup>

The Chipewyans made a practice of wrestling for women. This custom gives an insight into the Indian acceptance of what appears to be excessive brutality by the fur traders. The wrestling was not very violent and Hearne's account is amusing:

... the whole business consists in hauling each other about by the hair of the head: they are seldom known either to strike or kick one another. It is not uncommon for one of them to cut off his hair and to grease his ears, immediately before the contest begins. This, however, is done privately; and it is sometimes truly laughable, to see one of the parties strutting about with an air of great importance, and calling out, "Where is he? Why does he not come out?" when the other will

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<sup>24</sup>R. Glover (ed.), Hearne's Journeys, p. 69. The only known instance of violence occurred during the summer of 1804 when two men at Fond du Lac were killed and four others were murdered a short distance from Fort Chipewyan. Vide Nottingham House Journals, 1804-1805, B 39/a/4, Sept. 11, 1804. There were rumors of a plot to massacre the fort's inhabitants in 1813. Vide L. Masson, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 109, Wentzell's Letters, dated Mackenzie River, Feb. 28, 1814.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.



bolt out with a clean shorn head and greased ears, rush on his antagonist, seize him by the hair, and though perhaps a much weaker man, soon drag him to the ground....<sup>26</sup>

The prize, possibly under protest, went to the victor.<sup>27</sup> Hearne told of his band coming upon a woman who had lost her way. Before the evening was over, "the poor girl was actually won and lost at wrestling by near half a score different men...."<sup>28</sup> Women, or girls,<sup>29</sup> were often sold.<sup>30</sup> These "objects of traffic", as Mackenzie called them, were valued differently than the women of European civilization. Mackenzie perhaps was not as discerning as Hearne who appreciated the Chipewyan estimate of a woman. More than personality was involved:

... there is no such thing as any rule or standard for beauty. Ask a Northern Indian, what is beauty? he will answer, a broad flat face, small eyes, high cheek bones, three or four black lines a-cross [sic] each cheek, a low forehead, a large broad chin, a clumsy hook-nose, a tawny hide, and breasts hanging down to the belt. These beauties are ... rendered more valuable when the possessor is capable of dressing all kinds of skins, converting them into ... clothing, and able to carry eight or ten stone [a stone equals 14 pounds] in Summer, or haul a much greater weight in winter.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., pp. 67-68.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 170.

<sup>29</sup> Hearne preferred to use the term 'girls' because women who had the extra burden of children were less desirable. Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp. 56-57. Matonabee had seven wives, "most of whom for size would have made good grenadiers." Ibid., p. 56.





In marriage, the father had the right of "disposing of his daughter."<sup>32</sup>

Mackenzie added, in a footnote:

They do not, however, sell them as slaves, but as companions to those who are supposed to live more comfortably than themselves.<sup>33</sup>

Consequently, it is easy to understand why the European trader was able to treat the Chipewyan Indians on terms not quite those of European etiquette.

There was some traffic in women at Fort Chipewyan in 1795: "... they are faithful to their husbands, who, however, on the slightest offence would willingly make them part of their traffic."<sup>34</sup> This willingness to part with their women was part of their culture, especially when, as Mackenzie noted, a daughter could be cared for by a European man who possessed greater means than her father. James Mackenzie told of the treatment of a woman in 1800:

This Indian brought his daughter, who deserted in the course of the winter from Morin, at Slave Lake, in order to be returned to her husband (Morin). Mr. Porter wrote me, by Morin's orders to sell her to the highest bidder and debit Morin for the amount.... I therefore kept the woman to be disposed of when the Peace River<sup>35</sup> Bucks begin to rutt most, I mean in the month of May.

<sup>32</sup>J. Garvin (ed.), Mackenzie's Voyages, p. 122.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 122n. Emphasis mine.

<sup>34</sup>"An Account of the Athabasca Indians by a Partner of the North West Company," Manuscript, McGill University Library, p. 7. G. C. Davidson dates this 1795, in op. cit., p. 233.

<sup>35</sup>Journal of James Mackenzie, P.A.C., April 9, 1800.





The traffic in women must have been quite extensive because the Chipewyans requested Mackenzie to stop the practice. His reply was, "... we would do as we thought proper...."<sup>36</sup>

Marriages in the fashion of the north provided mates for the men and, just as important, they allowed the traders to establish more or less permanent contacts with the Indians. G. Simpson expressed his attitude toward these marriages:

... the restrictions which the Honble Committee have put on Matrimonial alliances and which I consider most baneful to the interests of the Company are tantamount to a prohibition of forming a most important chain of connection with the Natives....<sup>37</sup>

The alternative, Simpson pointed out, was a greater dependence upon the Indians,

... who have no other feelings than those which interest and mercenary views create towards us; it is never matured to attachment and a price is only required to make those on whom our existence depends our inveterate Enemies.<sup>38</sup>

Another cultural trait which interacted with the fur trade was the custom of plundering goods from those who were at a disadvantage.<sup>39</sup> On one occasion the Chipewyans took women, furs, hides, and bows and arrows from Copper Indians.<sup>40</sup> A meeting with another band of Chipewyans brought

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., April 18, 1800. Cf. Turnor's remarks in his journal. J. B. Tyrrell (ed.), Hearne and Turnor Journals, p. 446, April 28, 1792.

<sup>37</sup> E. Rich (ed.), Simpson's Athabasca Journal, pp. 395-396.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. Emphasis mine.

<sup>39</sup> Hearne was robbed of all he had on his second journey. R. Glover (ed.), Hearne's Journeys, pp. 31-32.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 79.



about a similar situation except that, "their poverty protected them from being plundered by those of my crew...."<sup>41</sup> Thus the North West Company exploited an Indian custom when they seized furs from the Indians. The taking of furs was made easier by the timidity of the Chipewyans when they were faced by a stronger opponent.<sup>42</sup> When there was competition for furs, the North West Company simply forced them into submission by employing superior numbers. The practice of sending men en derouine,<sup>43</sup> i.e., with bands of Indians, not only encouraged them to make good hunts, but also to ensure that they would bring their furs to the right company:

Several Chipewyans went away, the Old Company [North West Company] are sending men with them to prevent the Indians from giving us any Skins - had we men here to spare, we could have sent away some also ... but the want of hands prevents me, & must trust to the Honesty of the Indians altogether; which in general is pretty good had they the liberty of giving their skins where they chose - but they are very much intimidated by the Old Coy & if they are known to give a skin elsewhere, they are sure to receive a good drubbing....<sup>44</sup>

Superiority in numbers of men, then, was a prime consideration in management when more than one company competed for the furs. Such superiority

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 92. See also p. 176 for another similar happening.

<sup>42</sup>Journal of James Mackenzie, P.A.C., April 20, June 10, August 4, 1800.

<sup>43</sup>En derouine was used to encourage the Indians to work industriously at trapping because once they had received their credits, they were less inclined to exert themselves. During competitive times the practice became much more significant.

<sup>44</sup>Nottingham House Journals, 1802-1803, B 39/a/1, October 13, 1802.



greatly impressed the Chipewyans. Their timidity caused them to withdraw from any clash with a force they considered superior. This is brought out by Alexander Mackenzie:

They make war on the Esquimaux, who cannot resist their superior numbers, and put them to death, as it is a principal [sic] with them never to make prisoners. At the same time they tamely submit to the Knisteneaux [Cree] who are so numerous as themselves, when they treat them as enemies.<sup>45</sup>

In the final conflict between the Northwesters and the Hudson's Bay men, a major reason for the defection of the Indians from the North West Company was the fact that they realized the English were just as powerful as the Canadians.

When John Clarke arrived in the Athabaska district, he made an impressive show of force by keeping light canoes of men "continually running about...."<sup>46</sup> On another occasion,

Their vaunting Commander in Chief with a number of his field officers and Flag came over in two light canoes, crowded with men, making a pompous Display of a multiplicity of warlike impliments [sic].<sup>47</sup>

What impressed the Indians most, however, was the amount of trade goods. Quantity alone was not sufficient since the Chipewyans were shrewd traders. Alexander Mackenzie described them as deceitful and

<sup>45</sup> J. Garvin (ed.), Mackenzie's Voyages, p. 126.

<sup>46</sup> Selkirk Papers, P.A.C., MG 19 E 1(1), vol. 30, 9130, John McGillivray to McGillis and Stewart, dated Dunvegan, Dec. 15, 1815.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 9132.





fraudulent.<sup>48</sup> They had "little regard to private property."<sup>49</sup> Hearne called them "the greatest philosophers, as they never give themselves the trouble to acquire what they can do well enough without."<sup>50</sup> Professor Rich has shown, in his excellent article on Indian trade habits,<sup>51</sup> the Indian had concepts of property and commercial value which do not correspond to European ones. By the eighteenth century the Indians could not do without European trade goods. Their trading, however, was not only motivated by economic necessity, but also by concepts of social behavior.<sup>52</sup> Their trading was conducted along social and economic lines. They wanted to trade their furs for articles which would satisfy their immediate needs and wants, i.e., what they could use or consume immediately. Since the Indians were only interested in satisfying their immediate needs, the basis of fur trading was to persuade them to trade his furs for European articles. Indian trade habits involved an exchange of pleasantries and generalities before the serious business of bargaining was begun. The need to entice the Indian to trade increased during competitive periods.

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<sup>48</sup>J. Garvin (ed.), Mackenzie's Voyages, p. 127.

<sup>49</sup>R. Glover (ed.), Hearne's Journeys, p. 69.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p. 52. Cf. Mackenzie's comment that they were always concerned with the "advancement of their own interests." Voyages, p. 127.

<sup>51</sup>Rich, E., "Trade Habits and Economic Motivation Among the Indians of North America." The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science, vol. 26, No. 1, Feb. 1960, pp. 35-53. Hereafter referred to as E. Rich, "Trade Habits".

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., pp. 35-36.



When one company controlled the outlet of trade goods, the Indians could be more easily persuaded to barter their furs. Thus monopoly was a situation which permitted the fur traders to hold the upper hand. Rich explains how Indian concepts of trade and property differed from those of the European:

It was the Indians' lack of a sense of property (as the word was used by the Europeans) which made the fur trade the only branch of commerce which needed some other branch of control and some other incentive than the European controls and incentives which arose from a sense of property. This was the reality which explained the perpetuation of monopoly....<sup>53</sup>

Monopoly, then, was the solution which both the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company relied upon to ensure a successful return in furs. Both English and Canadian traders realized that competition too readily answered the Indians' desire to supply their needs without effort. Offering higher prices for their furs would only make them that much more satisfied with the quantity of furs they were already bringing to the fort.<sup>54</sup> In place of European concepts of prices and supply, the fur trader devised other methods of making successful returns. These methods developed from the fur trade's adjustment to Indian culture.

The social part of trading for furs was the key to a successful trade. The Indians based their bargaining on the idea of an exchange of gifts. Gratuities, as these gifts were called, were given upon the arrival and departure of Indians at the post. These gratuities were, under monopoly,

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p. 49.



a "bit of tobacco and a dram".<sup>55</sup> During competition the minimum gift was increased in quantity because the Indians were able to bargain furs at more than one post. The trader who offered many gratuities would have the opportunity for a more successful trade because the Indians would at least be present in his trading hall.

In an effort to entice the Indians to hunt and trade furs consistently, the traders placed a great emphasis on the manner of making chiefs of some of the more productive hunters. The Chipewyans tended to roam about in small groups in search of food, clothing and shelter. The leaders of these groups were more like guides than chiefs since there was no real need for the latter. The Indians did, however, realize the importance of a leader when they went to trade their furs:

... it is an universal practice with the Indian Leaders, both Northern and Southern, when going to the Company's Factory, to use their influence and interest in canvassing for companions; as they find by experience that a large gang gains them much respect ... the authority of those great men, when absent from the Company's Factory, never extends beyond their own family....<sup>56</sup>

These chiefs, then, were created by the fur traders. James Keith observed in 1825, that,

... their influence & authority being little known beyond the circle of their own Family & immediate dependents.... Their estimation & treatment by Whites which are dependant [sic] on and regulated by their general habits & exertions, never fail to insure the Individual a proportionate share of attention or contempt

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<sup>55</sup> Journal of James Mackenzie, P.A.C., Feb. 17, 1800.

<sup>56</sup> R. Glover (ed.), Hearne's Journeys, p. 186.





from his own tribe - Like the coin of a Kingdom,  
they require the stamp & impression of the Sovereign  
to indicate their value & rend them Current - 57

The custom was also noted by Richardson in the late 1840s, "At present, the rank of a chief is not fully established among his own people until it is recognized at the fort to which he resorts."<sup>58</sup> The evidence shows that these chiefs never became influential in Indian society except for their leadership in bartering furs.

When an Indian was recognized as a chief, he was entitled to a place of first importance at the fort. Upon approaching the fort, he would send a messenger ahead to announce his impending arrival.<sup>59</sup> The trader would then, if the chief deserved it on past performance, send tobacco and liquor to him.<sup>60</sup> His arrival at the fort was often greeted with a "salute of Fire arms and hoisted flags".<sup>61</sup> He and his band were then treated to more tobacco and liquor. The 'clothing' of a chief was the next important step and James Mackenzie described the ceremony, an occasion on which he distributed tobacco and part of a keg of mixed rum to five chiefs, thereby saving some expense for his employers:

... they seemed quite happy with their good luck. Had these presents been given to these "great men" separately, it would not have appeared half so much, nor have been enough to content them.

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<sup>57</sup> Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1824-1825, B 39/e/8, p. 30.

<sup>58</sup> J. Richardson, Arctic Searching Expedition, vol. 2, p. 27.

<sup>59</sup> Fort Chipewyan Post Journals, 1819-1820, B 39/a/15, March 31, 1820.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> E. Rich (ed.), Simpson's Athabasca Journal, p. 310, March 28, 1821.



Several harangues suitable to the occasion were made on both sides.... He made many ceremonies before he accepted of the laced coat; he wished to have a red great coat, short breeches and cotton stockings, like the English Chief some years ago at the Old Fort.... In short his head was already so intoxicated by his change of fortune, that he did not know which end of him stood uppermost, whether he ... walked or flew....<sup>62</sup>

The custom was carried out in a similar manner by the Hudson's Bay Company in 1823 when four chiefs were outfitted.<sup>63</sup> At this time each chief received one keg of liquor, a suit of clothing, and four feet of tobacco. Although the use of liquor was discontinued, the chiefs still continued to receive their outfits of clothing.<sup>64</sup>

The fall visit was the most important one for the Indians since this was the time the fort's supplies arrived from the east. After the arrival of the canoes, they were given their debts for the ensuing season. The system of giving debts simply meant the fort followed the usual custom of the fur trade by giving the Indians their goods on credit in the fall. In the spring the Indians would presumably pay their debts, i.e., the credit which was given to them in the fall.

In the opinion of James Keith, the gathering of the Indians at the fort in the fall and their subsequent lengthy visit was related to the spread of sickness, disease, and a mood of depression among them:

... languor and inaction at one of the most inclement and unwholesome seasons of the year, is ... productive

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<sup>62</sup>Journal of James Mackenzie, P.A.C., April 2, 1800.

<sup>63</sup>Fort Chipewyan Journal, Alberta Provincial Library, May 26, 1823.

<sup>64</sup>Fort Chipewyan Post Journals, 1831-1834, B 39/a/29, April 10, 1833.



of a variety of complaints ... particularly the Chipewyans, others are not so much damped and depressed by their own Complaints, the sickness or mortality of their comrades and relatives, that not only the Fall hunt, but that of half the winter is lost before they recruit their spirits and resume their winter habits of activity and exertion....<sup>65</sup>

The introduction of disease usually caused great hardship among the Indians. Alexander Mackenzie mentioned that "rheumatic pains, the flux and consumption" were common.<sup>66</sup> The diseases which caused the greatest trouble were those introduced by the white men and against which the Indians had little immunity.<sup>67</sup> During the summer of 1803, a peculiar illness, which Fidler said was a "stomach complaint with Great lassitude & shortness of breathing,"<sup>68</sup> caused the death of at least thirty-six hunters.<sup>69</sup> This sickness caused the Indians to leave the area around the fort in an effort to escape the disease.<sup>70</sup> The few Indians who remained accomplished very little since there were so many deaths. In 1819-1820, William Todd wrote:

... one of the women belonging to the Fort [Wedderburn] has taken the Measles the disease appears to have been brought in by the families belonging to the NWC. The

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<sup>65</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1823-1824, B 39/e/6, p. 5.

<sup>66</sup>J. Garvin (ed.), Mackenzie's Voyages, p. 127. The flux and consumption were probably bowel disorders and tuberculosis respectively.

<sup>67</sup>Mackenzie said venereal diseases were very common. Idem.

<sup>68</sup>Nottingham House Journals, B 39/a/3, September 5, 1802.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., Sept. 30, 1803.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., Sept. 5, 1803.





hooping [sic] cough has likewise made its appearance, a disease particularly distressing among the Indians as its depriving them of the means of subsistence, the whole of their caution in approaching an animal being rendered abortive by a single cough.<sup>71</sup>

Starvation thus faced those families whose hunters were too ill to hunt.<sup>72</sup>

By December, the measles had spread throughout the district.<sup>73</sup> The Indians naturally had a great fear of these diseases; in 1833, John Charles told of their apprehension:

The fellows have wind of the prevalence of cholera ... having swept off such numbers in Montreal last summer.... And after having paid them for every thing ... begged to be indulged with large advances to go to their lands and not return till next April, to be out of the way of sickness....<sup>74</sup>

Most upsetting to a season's hunt was a death in a family or band, as Fidler's comment on the death of three hunters shows, " - which loss in killing skins will be considerably felt in the winter - besides casting a melancholy gloom on nearly all the rest...."<sup>75</sup> After a death the Chipewyans observed a period of mourning which Hearne said was up to a year in duration.<sup>76</sup> During this time the Indians destroyed or discarded

<sup>71</sup>Fort Chipewyan Post Journals, 1819-1820, B 39/a/15, Oct. 27, 1819.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., Dec. 20, 1819, and Jan. 28, 1820.

<sup>73</sup>Idem. The illness crippled the fur hunts. Infra Chapter 6.

<sup>74</sup>Fort Chipewyan Post Journals, 1831-1834, B 39/a/29, April 10, 1833.

<sup>75</sup>Nottingham House Journals, 1803-1804, B 39/a/3, Sept. 13, 1803.

<sup>76</sup>R. Glover (ed.), Hearne's Journeys, p. 219.



most of their possessions. The custom had a direct effect upon the fur trade. In 1800, John Porter noted that the death of one of the hunters had caused the rest to throw away most of their provisions.<sup>77</sup> And in 1820, William Todd recorded the result of the measles epidemic:

... the present moment is particularly discouraging for traders, the Indians hunted little, yet several of them are almost naked having buried the greater part of their clothing with their deceased relatives and are now making a demand for another supply.<sup>78</sup>

A similar situation was noted in 1833.<sup>79</sup>

Not only illness and death but also superstition affected the hunt. Apparently if they encountered little success in the early part of the season they blamed it upon an evil spirit which haunted them. As George Simpson said, in 1820,

... they become so full impressed with the idea that some evil genius haunts them, that they give themselves up entirely to despair, they become careless, neglect their hunts, lay dormant in their encampments for weeks together, while a morsel of leather or Babiche remains to keep them in existence....<sup>80</sup>

The situation was no better in 1833,

The Indians tenting near the House are rather alarmed, they have it that there is Innab Honnee as they call them, haunting their movements, that is Bad People who are always

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<sup>77</sup> Journal of John Porter, Masson Collection, P.A.C., MG 19 C 1, vol. 6, July 28, 1800.

<sup>78</sup> Fort Chipewyan Post Journals, 1819-1820, B 39/a/15, Mar. 16, 1820.

<sup>79</sup> Fort Chipewyan Post Journals, 1831-1834, B 39/a/29, March 9, 1833.

<sup>80</sup> E. Rich (ed.), Simpson's Athabasca Journal, p. 197, Dec. 9, 1820.



in search of mischief but can never be seen ... and to give it credit they give out that a Chipewyan who left this last Sunday week is missing....<sup>81</sup>

The result was that some of the Indians were not going to travel to the barren grounds that spring.

The extent of the Indians' superstition (in the early years at least) was noted by Peter Fidler in his travels with them during the winter of 1791-1792. Ten pieces of trade goods were left in a log house near the Slave River rapids (by what is now Fort Smith). The Canadians had "an Image set upon a painted red pole over the house about the size of a small child."<sup>82</sup> Fidler said although the Indians passed by it all winter not one would venture near the cabin since they were

... thoroughly persuaded that ... the Een coz zy as they called it would acquaint the Canadians of the offender which beliefs [sic] I further confirmed....<sup>83</sup>

In this instance, the superstitious habits of the Indians aided the traders in their quest for furs.

The hunt for furs, however, was not assisted by the indifference of the Chipewyans to liquor. They usually came to the trading hall with "... a regular and uninterrupted use of their understanding, which is always directed to the advancement of their own interest...."<sup>84</sup> Although

<sup>81</sup>Fort Chipewyan Post Journals, 1831-1834, B 39/a/29, April 30, 1833.

<sup>82</sup>"Journal of a Journey with the Chepewyans or Northern Indians, to the Slave Lake, & to the East & West of the Slave River, in 1791 & 2, by Peter Fidler," in J. B. Tyrrell (ed.), Hearne and Turnor Journals, p. 553.

<sup>83</sup>Idem.

<sup>84</sup>J. Garvin (ed.), Mackenzie's Voyages, p. 127.





rum was used to induce the Chipewyans to part with their furs, few of them became habitual users. They were more interested in obtaining ammunition. Philip Turnor said when provisions were brought in the spring, "... the Chepewyan tribe will not trade Liquor consistently are not fond of parting with their provision, but powder and shot will draw it from them."<sup>85</sup> John Porter, who kept a provisions post on Lac Claire during the summer of 1800 made the following observation on liquor and the Chipewyans:

... Paid them in Rum - Note any Person who trades Rum wt the Chipiwians requires a Great deal of Patience they are Such a Beggarly [illegible] Set of beings that they would almost as Soon Part with their Blood as Part with a piece of meat or any thing else for Liquor what they Bring is always in Scraps & handfuls & if they are not Paid as much for that as if it were Twice the value they Call him immediately ungenerous.... Mr. Samuel Hearn's [sic] remark is very just with regard to this People Being Drunkards when they Can Get Liquer [sic] at free Cost but they are Seldom So improvident as to Pay for it.<sup>86</sup>

Hence, liquor was regarded not as a trade article but a gratuity in the fur trade. As E. E. Rich points out, "There was no question of setting a quantity of spirits against a quantity of furs...."<sup>87</sup>

The Chipewyans, however, were unlike their southern neighbours, the Crees, whose taste for liquor was so pronounced that a separate post, Pierre au Calumet, was maintained for them on the Athabaska River. Although

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<sup>85</sup> J. B. Tyrrell (ed.), Hearne and Turnor Journals, p. 452, May 2, 1792.

<sup>86</sup> Journal of John Porter, loc. cit., June 12 and 13, 1800.

<sup>87</sup> E. Rich, "Trade Habits", p. 50.



provisions were collected at this post, another reason was,

... to keep the Northern Indians apart otherwise when they are drinking the Southern Indians are sure to insult the Northern Indians though they should be much inferior in numbers through a supposed superiority in rank....<sup>88</sup>

Porter paid the Crees rum for provisions and then gave them more liquor on credit.<sup>89</sup>

As a result of the Chipewyan attitude toward liquor, the Hudson's Bay Company was able to withdraw it from the trade at Fort Chipewyan in 1826.<sup>90</sup> Although the Indians were upset at the regulation and threatened to withdraw to their own lands,<sup>91</sup> the reports and journals after this date show that the rule had little effect upon the returns of the post. John Richardson reported in 1851 that "the present race of Chepewyans are ignorant of the use of spirituous liquors."<sup>92</sup>

The attitudes and trading habits of the Indians changed when competition entered the Athabaska district. Competition meant that their furs were sought by more than one company. It did not take long before

<sup>88</sup>J. B. Tyrrell (ed.), Hearne and Turnor Journals, p. 458, May 10, 1792.

<sup>89</sup>Journal of John Porter, loc. cit., June 13, 1800.

<sup>90</sup>R. Fleming (ed.), Minutes of Northern Council, p. 168, June 26, 1826, Resolution 130.

<sup>91</sup>John McLeod Papers, 1811-1837, P.A.C., MG 19 A 23, pp. 172-173, Alexander Stewart to Governor, Chief Factors, and Chief Traders, dated Fort Chipewyan, Sept. 28, 1826.

<sup>92</sup>J. Richardson, Arctic Searching Expedition, vol. 2, p. 31.



they realized the possibilities of the situation. The Indians were able to assume some independence from the monopoly exercised by the North West Company. The fact that even such a timorous tribe would readily exploit a competitive situation may be appreciated in Hearne's statement:

... they possess a considerable degree of deceit, and are very complete adepts in the art of flattery, which they never spare as long as they find that it conduces to their interest ... if the least respect be shown them, it makes them intolerably insolent ... by giving him [the Indian] the least indulgence ... he will grow indolent, inactive, and troublesome, and only contrive methods to tax the generosity of an European.<sup>93</sup>

Malchom Ross was made painfully aware of the Chipewyans' attitude to property in 1796:

They even had the Impudence [sic] to ask what the Goods is brought into their Country for if they are not to get them as they need them....<sup>94</sup>

They firmly believed that "They had not right to go without the Necessaries for want of furs when goods was at their doors."<sup>95</sup> With this concept it is not surprising that they welcomed opposition traders. Turnor reported the insolence of the Chipewyans to the Canadians because the Hudson's Bay Company was expected to set up an opposing post at Fort Chipewyan.<sup>96</sup>

The opposition, however, did not arrive until 1799 when the XY Company set up a trading house. The Bay men arrived in 1802. During the

<sup>93</sup>R. Glover, (ed.), Hearne's Journeys, pp. 198-199.

<sup>94</sup>Quoted in E. Rich, "Trade Habits", p. 45.

<sup>95</sup>Idem.

<sup>96</sup>J. B. Tyrrell (ed.), Hearne and Turnor Journals, p. 452, May 2, 1792.





time of competition, which lasted until 1806, the Indians were wooed, cajoled, and intimidated by the competing companies. The Indians tended to remain loyal to the North West Company since it had established ties with them. While they were anxious to trade with more than one company, they were careful to maintain trading contacts with the company that had the most goods and services to offer. They were afraid to change to any new trading concern for fear it would not return another year. Fidler says this was part of the handicap the Hudson's Bay Company faced in 1802. The Indians had expected the English to return after Turnor's visit in the 1790s:

... our telling them that we would return the same summer following with plenty of Goods & to build houses in their Country ... but our not keeping to our word in that respect; it makes them dubious that we shall again abandon them to the mercy of the Canadian traders....<sup>97</sup>

The Indians were mindful of their first masters who held place of superiority by reason of their numbers, goods, and methods. The most common treatment was a sound beating, which they seldom resisted since they were "such very great cowards".<sup>98</sup> One of the few instances of violence occurred in 1804:

... not a single Jepowyan has been here since the beginning of June.... They killed 4 of the Old Co [North West Company] men within a very few miles from this - and others murdered & plundered their house at the East end of this Lake, 2 men & all the Goods, then burnt it down - this they are doing in retaliation for the numerous insults and very bad usage they receive from the Old Co....<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Nottingham House Journals, 1802-1803, B 39/a/1, Oct. 4, 1802.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., Oct. 13, 1802. Supra pp. 12-13.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., B 39/a/3, Sept. 11, 1804.



This outburst of violence by the Indians had the effect of making them "still more afraid than before" of the North West Company.<sup>100</sup> In 1813 it was reported that there was: "... a conspiracy to massacre all the Whites of Fort Chipewean and Big Island.... The Chipewean tribe appears to have been the first instigators...."<sup>101</sup> During his stay at Fort Chipewyan in 1819, John Franklin reported a large tower had been constructed as a result of the 1813 threat.<sup>102</sup>

The generous trade in goods during competition also brought out the Chipewyan shrewdness in trading. James Mackenzie complained that: "These damned Rascals delight in nothing more than in Changing forts and in getting Goods for nothing at every place they go to...."<sup>103</sup> John Porter said that the Indians at Great Slave Lake were demanding "Goods to be Sold here on the Same Conditions as at Fort Chipiwan...."<sup>104</sup> After Porter assured them the prices were the same, the Indians, "... then Said we Should reduce their Last Spring Credits in the Same manner...."<sup>105</sup> Porter was able to talk them out of this last demand. Fidler said one Indian received a

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., B 39/a/5a, Dec. 7, 1805.

<sup>101</sup> L. Masson, op. cit., vol. 1, Letters of F. Wentzell, p. 109, F. Wentzell to R. Mackenzie, dated Mackenzie's River, Feb. 28, 1814.

<sup>102</sup> J. Franklin, Narrative, p. 152.

<sup>103</sup> Journal of James Mackenzie, P.A.C., Aug. 16, 1799.

<sup>104</sup> Journal of John Porter, P.A.C., Oct. 5, 1800.

<sup>105</sup> Idem.



complete outfit for his family although "what the man may kill this winter will not pay for 1/4 of those articles."<sup>106</sup> Prior to the union of the Canadian companies in 1804, he reported the:

... Inds. killing very few furs [sic]. Indeed they have very little occasion to work as they are liberally supplied betwixt those two Companies with Goods at a meere [sic] nothing....<sup>107</sup>

During the period of competition from 1815 to 1821, the Indians responded in a similar manner to the same treatment. William reported that the Indians were industrious while the Northwesters were unopposed in the Athabaska district but that opposition had "rendered them indolent and dissipated."<sup>108</sup> The shrewdness of the Indians in taking advantage of the situation is reflected in Simpson's observation:

... they settle among themselves who are to join the French and who the English; the head of a numerous Family almost invariably attaches so many to one side and so many to the other, and individuals frequently take credit at each Fort and divide their hunts....<sup>109</sup>

The intense competition placed the Indians so badly in debt that Simpson reported it was hopeless to expect them to pay their accounts.<sup>110</sup>

<sup>106</sup> Nottingham House Journals, B 39/a/3, Oct. 11, 1803.

<sup>107</sup> Idem., Jan. 23, 1804.

<sup>108</sup> Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1820-1821, B 39/e/3, p. 18.

<sup>109</sup> E. Rich (ed.), Simpson's Athabasca Journal, p. 358.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 73, Oct. 3, 1820.





William Brown said the major cause for diminished returns was "the enormous load of Indian Debts from last year."<sup>111</sup> In an effort to stimulate the Indians to make better hunts Simpson reduced their debts by one half.<sup>112</sup> The costs to the Company were especially high because the Chipewyan preferred good trade articles:

The trade with the Chipewyans has always been considered very expensive ... owing to their partiality to Bale Goods, they have been long accustomed to be indulged in this way, and for this only will they be industrious....<sup>113</sup>

After the discontinuance of liquor in the trade, the Chipewyan trade was made more expensive to the Company.<sup>114</sup> The practice of giving debts (i.e., credit) to the Chipewyans was made more costly to the Company because they could obtain goods and retire to their lands, thereby evading payment. Consequently, the debt system proved to be an inefficient method of trade with the Chipewyans. In 1822, the Indian debts were reduced by forty per cent.<sup>115</sup>

A change in the system was decided upon in 1823 by James Keith. The change was:

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<sup>111</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1820-1821, B 39/e/3, p. 22.

<sup>112</sup>E. Rich (ed.), Simpson's Athabasca Report, p. 73, Oct. 3, 1820.

<sup>113</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1822-1823, B 39/e/5, p. 9.

<sup>114</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1825-1826, B 39/e/9, p. 6.

<sup>115</sup>Ibid., p. 3.



... peculiarly required by the Chipewyans, with who Debts and Gratuities had been carried to a greater height and were liable to much greater risk and abuse than with any other Tribe....<sup>116</sup>

The changes were:

... a reduction in the Price of Goods from the Old New Tariff of about 25 P Cent, a discontinuance of all Petty Gratuities throughout the year, keeping up however the usual presents of Clothing in spring to those whose exertions, character and general deportment might warrant such liberality - <sup>117</sup>

The price of their trade goods was reduced as "a full compensation for the discontinuance of petty gratuities."<sup>118</sup> The new system brought a saving of £65.8.9 over the old method of giving gratuities.<sup>119</sup> Although Keith's system failed to get away altogether from the giving of credit,<sup>120</sup> he hoped that it would eventually be done away with.<sup>121</sup> Keith realized the impossibility of trying to regulate the giving of trade goods according to the work habits of each Indian.<sup>122</sup> Some modification of the plan had taken place by 1828. These changes were noted by Simpson:

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>118</sup> Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1824-1825, B 39/e/8, p. 7.

<sup>119</sup> Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1825-1826, B 39/e/9, p. 4.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>122</sup> Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1824-1825, B 39/e/8, p. 8.



They are already become quite reconciled to the abandonment of the Credit system, our dealings with them will therefore be entirely confined to a barter trade in future: Liquor they never talk of now, and it is singular enough that those Indians, who but a few years ago were nearly unmanageable, from the bad habits contracted in the hottest opposition ever known in the Indian country....<sup>123</sup>

John McLean explained the barter method in use at Fort Chipewyan in 1833:

Beaver is the standard according to which all other furs are rated; so many martens, so many foxes, & c., equal to one beaver. The trader, on receiving the Indian's hunt, proceeds to reckon it up according to this rule, giving the Indian a quill for each beaver; these quills are again exchanged at the counter for whatever article he wants.<sup>124</sup>

An indication that the new system proved satisfactory to the Indians was noted by Alexander Stewart in 1829. The Indians were quite pleased with "finding themselves so rich in property."<sup>125</sup> In 1834 the Indians were not heavily in debt since they were able to pay the advances they received in the fall the following spring.<sup>126</sup> It must then be assumed that debts were given in the fall. Evidently the system was modified to meet the times.

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<sup>123</sup> Part of Dispatch from George Simpson Esqr. Governor of Ruperts Land to the Governor and Committee of the Hudson's Bay Company London, E. E. Rich (ed.), The Hudson's Bay Record Society, London, 1947, pp. 8-9. Hereafter referred to as E. Rich (ed.), Simpson's 1828 Journey.

<sup>124</sup> John McLean's Notes of a Twenty-Five Year's Service in the Hudson's Bay Territory, W. S. Wallace (ed.), The Champlain Society, Toronto, 1932, p. 137. Hereafter referred to as W. S. Wallace (ed.), John McLean's Notes.

<sup>125</sup> Fort Chipewyan Post Journals, 1828-1829, B 39/a/27, Mar. 30, 1833.

<sup>126</sup> Fort Chipewyan Post Journals, 1831-1834, B 39/a/29, Mar. 17, 1834. The limits of this thesis preclude a full evaluation of the benefits and efficiency of the Keith system since it had been in effect for only seven or eight years.





## CHAPTER SIX

### THE ROLE OF FORT CHIPEWYAN IN THE FUR TRADE

The economic importance of a fur trade post depends on its contribution of furs. A profitable yield depended upon several factors, some subject to human control and others to natural elements. Nature controlled the supply of fur and the weather. In 1795 and 1812, according to William Brown, two serious epidemics of distemper depleted the beaver population in the Athabaska district.<sup>1</sup> Although the effects of the weather could be modified by a more efficient system of transportation, it was impossible to predict or prevent an early freeze-up which blocked the passage of canoes and boats.<sup>2</sup> Management could provide efficient experienced hunters and trappers to manipulate the fur market and control wage costs. Each of these factors, however, requires some qualification. Certainly the efficiency of a trading post depended upon its manager and staff. It was the wintering partner's responsibility to choose the fort site, to select and requisition his trade goods, to entice the Indians to trade their valuable furs, and to get the men under his command to render a profitable return on their time. In a district as large as the Athabaska, these responsibilities were delegated, in part, to the clerks. First class clerks were expected

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<sup>1</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1820-1821, B 39/e/3, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup>Vide Chapter 3 on transportation.



to assume the management of lesser posts, such as those at Pierre au Calumet, Lac Claire, and Fond du Lac. The efficiency of the Indian hunters is discussed in Chapter five. It must be reiterated here that their efficiency as trappers depended upon their health, their superstitions, their immediate needs, and generally upon their concept of the happy life. Market conditions were partially controlled by the supply of fur; fashion dictated the demand for fur. The substitution of nutria<sup>3</sup> and silk in hat-making had a tremendous effect upon beaver values in the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Prior to 1821, wages were tied in with the attempt of the North West Company to regulate the cost of obtaining furs. High wages meant high prices at a fort. By extending large credits to its employees the North West Company was able to pay their salaries. The existing evidence, by no means complete, shows that salaries were often consumed by purchases at a fort. Furthermore, the factors mentioned above affected profits less under monopoly conditions but under competition their effects could be vital.

It is within the frame-work of monopoly and competition that the economic value of Fort Chipewyan and the Athabaska district can be determined. The Athabaska district was able to provide a rich return in furs during the years when monopoly prevailed. In time of competition, however, the cost of obtaining furs increased to a point where the

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<sup>3</sup>The fur of a South American rodent.

<sup>4</sup>H. T. Martin, Castorologia; or, The history and traditions of the Canadian beaver, Montreal, 1892, p. 47. H. Innis, The Fur Trade, pp. 334-335.





district was in danger of becoming a liability. Generally any district which faced prolonged periods of competition lost its place of importance in fur trade returns. Professor Innis points out:

Both companies took advantage of monopoly departments to support the losses suffered in competitive areas. The Northwest Company had guarded the Athabasca department as a reserve of the best furs and as a monopoly but the effect of competition was pronounced.<sup>5</sup>

During periods of competition the cost of supplying the Indians with gifts, the native indolence in times of plenty and the corresponding decrease in returns from seasonal hunts combined to reduce the profits of the fort. The trade in the Athabaska district had to be regulated with strict economy to realize any profit. Chief among the factors which regulated the Athabaska trade was transportation.<sup>6</sup> Throughout the entire North West Company period the seasonal hazards of supplying goods to, and obtaining furs from, Fort Chipewyan are clearly evident. It was only during monopolistic conditions that these hazards could be minimized because the fur traders were able to set their standard of trade without any thought of competitive trade goods. During competition,

... the end of the line [of transportation] lay in the hands of the Indians, who rapidly seized the chances which competition gave them, to enhance their prices and to demand more liquor and more debt.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>H. Innis, The Fur Trade, p. 274.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. Chapter 3 on transportation.

<sup>7</sup>E. Rich, History, vol. 2, p. 189.





The Indians, then, were the key to a successful trade. Once their loyalty was lost, a fur company was more than likely to find decreased returns. When the Northwesters found themselves faced with tactics similar to their own, as employed by John Clark and Colin Robertson, and when the struggle for the trading loyalties of the Indians became so prolonged that the natives turned away from their former masters, the rich Eldorado was lost until new masters had been found. The most effective way of bringing the North West Company to terms, then, was to strike at the heart of the fur empire, the Athabaska district, of which Fort Chipewyan was the chief post. From its beginnings until the late nineteenth century, when newer methods of transportation bypassed it, Fort Chipewyan was the capital of the north-west fur empire.

Thus Fort Chipewyan was more than a trading post; it also served as a depot for the receiving and transferring of goods and men. The trade of the entire region depended upon the efficient management of this post. One of the first concerns of management was the removal of any threat of competition. If competitors became established, not only would Fort Chipewyan decline in importance, but the profits of the whole north-west would be threatened. In order to establish the contribution made by Fort Chipewyan, it is necessary to divide the period of study into periods of monopoly and competition:

Prior to 1778:	Hudson's Bay Company monopoly
1778-1787	: Pond's Venture - competition
1788-1799	: North West Company - monopoly



1800-1806	:	North West Company XY Company Hudson's Bay Company - competition
1806-1815	:	North West Company - monopoly
1815-1821	:	North West Company Hudson's Bay Company - competition
1821-1835	:	Hudson's Bay Company - monopoly

The surviving documents for the period prior to 1821 are fragmentary, particularly the North West Company accounts. The winterers were careless about keeping track of their records, a fact noted in Ferdinand Wentzell's remarks to Roderick Mackenzie that the Athabaska accounts and journals, which were at Lac la Pluie in 1812, were carelessly strewn about the place.<sup>8</sup> Thus it has only been possible to gather information from letters and journals which make general references to the trade of the Athabaska district. Furthermore, these references often indicate the trend of the trade in the district, rather than referring directly to Fort Chipewyan.

The steady expansion of operations in the Athabaska district testifies to its importance. In 1786, four posts had been established; Peter Pond's fort on the Athabaska River, Laurent Leroux's post at the mouth of the Slave River, Cuthbert Grant's at the same place, and a provisions post on Peace River.<sup>9</sup> In 1799, Alexander Mackenzie said

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<sup>8</sup>L. Masson, op. cit., vol. 1, Wentzell's Letters to Roderick Mackenzie (hereafter cited as Wentzell's Letters), Feb. 28, 1814.

<sup>9</sup>H. Innis, The Fur Trade, pp. 199-200.



that eight outfits were being readied for the Athabaska country.<sup>10</sup>

Therefore it can be safely assumed that eight posts were in existence.

In 1802, the North West Company had eighteen posts in the district, out of a total of 117 for the entire trade.<sup>11</sup>

This rapid expansion can be attributed not only to the search for furs, but also to the competition of the XY Company. Out of a total of 1,058 employees, including partners, the Athabaska district, in 1802, employed 207, or nearly one-fifth of the total.<sup>12</sup> Considering the size of the territory involved and the fierce competition, it is not surprising that such large numbers of men were employed. Furthermore, extra men were needed in the work of transporting goods and furs beyond Fort Chipewyan. As a depot, Fort Chipewyan was:

... a general rendezvous for all Athabasca. Here the goods are set apart for all the different posts, in this extensive department; and to this place, the greater number of persons who have the charge of these posts, come every fall, to receive their merchandise.<sup>13</sup>

Even if all the documents were available for the North West Company period, it would be unfair to compare Fort Chipewyan's operations with those of an ordinary district post. In 1805 Athabaska, Athabaska River,

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<sup>10</sup>North West Company, Letter Book, 1798-1802, P.A.C., MG 19 B 1, pp. 47-48, Alexander Mackenzie to Messrs. McTavish Frobisher & Co., dated Mackinac, June 4, 1799.

<sup>11</sup>G. C. Davidson, op. cit., Appendix J, p. 280.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>G. Stanley (ed.), Harmon's Journal, p. 138, Sept. 8, 1808.





and Fort des Prairies employed 459 men out of 1,090.<sup>14</sup> According to Peter Fidler, there were 126 men in the Athabaska department in 1800. The number had increased to 195 in 1804.<sup>15</sup> Thus the statement of Innis that:

From 1801 to 1805 the proportionate number of men employed in the Athabasca department declined. This decline was characteristic of English River and the Northern departments generally....<sup>16</sup>

requires further explanation than he has given. First, does his total of 1,090 apply to all fur trade departments, or just to those in the north-west? He earlier refers to 981 men employed in the interior and lists separately the employees of Ottawa River, Saint Maurice, Hudson Bay, and Temiscamingue, a total of seventy-seven men. The real total for the entire trade in 1802 was 1,058. Of this figure, 444 were employed in Athabaska (257), English River (seventy-five), and Saskatchewan River (ninety-eight) departments.<sup>17</sup> If his figure of 1,090 is taken to include all the departments, then there is no great proportionate discrepancy between 444:1,058 and 459:1,090. Moreover, as Fidler's figures clearly point out, there was no proportionate decline in the men employed in the Athabaska district between 1801 and 1805; there was instead a sizable increase.

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<sup>14</sup>H. Innis, The Fur Trade, p. 238.

<sup>15</sup>Nottingham House Journals, 1802-1806, B 39/a/1, B 39/a/4.

<sup>16</sup>H. Innis, op. cit., p. 238.

<sup>17</sup>Innis stresses the interdependence of these three districts since the two latter were sources of provisions for the Athabaska district.



Innis noted that the number of employees remained fairly stationary between 1805 and 1818.<sup>18</sup> In the North West Company minutes of 1813, the district is listed as having 183 men, with a proposed reduction to 143 for 1814.<sup>19</sup> Whether the reduction actually took place is a matter of conjecture. It is obvious that reductions of men were difficult to make as a man was usually discharged at the place where he was hired.<sup>20</sup> Discharged men in the remote Athabaska could become a problem, if not a burden to the trade, if too many were allowed to go as freemen. The onset of competition changed the situation. North West wintering partners complained of the lack of men and that, in 1818, "2/3 of the people of the whole Department should be free next year."<sup>21</sup> In 1820-1821 Fort Chipewyan housed three partners, two clerks, sixty-nine men, thirty-one women, and forty-nine children.<sup>22</sup> Its rival, Fort Wedderburn, had, in addition to George Simpson and William Brown, ten clerks, and sixty-four men, although seven men spent most of the year at Ile-a-la-Crosse.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> W. S. Wallace, Documents, p. 287, July 11, 1814.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. Cf. The North West Papers, P.A.C., MG 19 A 30, vol. 2, Pt. 2, C. N. Bell Collection.

<sup>21</sup> North West Company Correspondence 1800-1827, H.B.C. Arch., F 3/2, J. G. McTavish to Angus Shaw and Proprietors, dated Peace River, Dec. 13, 1818.

<sup>22</sup> Fort Chipewyan Report on District, B 39/e/3, p. 21.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp. 11-12.





At the cessation of hostilities in 1821, then, Fort Chipewyan was overburdened with a surplus of men. The Athabaska district listed 330 men, excluding officers, in 1821-1822.<sup>24</sup> Edward Smith reports a smaller number for the year 1822. There were 234 men, sixty-nine women, fifty-five boys, and seventy-four girls, making a total of 432 European dependents on the Athabaska district trade.<sup>25</sup> In an effort to reduce the extra hands, 173 of them were sent to Canada in 1822, leaving 259 people in the department. Further reductions were made since 118 people were supported at the fort in 1823-1824.<sup>26</sup> Fort Chipewyan, with lower living costs occasioned by abundant fisheries, was being used as a residence for extra men not needed in Peace River.<sup>27</sup> The actual saving:

... was a reduction from that of the preceding year of about £1,000 and a further saving of wages between Athabasca and McKenzies River of £3,000, exclusive of that arising from Equipt and subsistence say of 63 Clerks and men....<sup>28</sup>

To the reduction of sixty-three persons for 1823-1824, Keith proposed a reduction of forty-six people for 1824-1825.<sup>29</sup> The sixty-three people

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<sup>24</sup>Fort Chipewyan Account Book, 1821-1822, B 39/d/9, pp. 37-45.

<sup>25</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1821-1822, B 39/e/4.

<sup>26</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1823-1824, B 39/e/6, p. 2. There were 57 men, 24 women, and 37 children, including extra people needed for the Land Arctic Expedition of John Franklin.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 9.





included one man, one woman, twenty-one girls, and forty-two children. The proposed reduction for 1824-1825 included one woman, sixteen girls, and twenty-nine children. Obviously, the policy was to reduce the numbers of children who could not make an economic contribution to the fort. Keith made no mention where these children came from, who their parents were, or where they were sent. Keith felt that any further reduction would impair the efficiency of the trade. A change in the method of transportation to Mackenzie River posts allowed a further decrease of about twenty to thirty men in 1826.<sup>30</sup> According to the district report there were 111 people dependent on Fort Chipewyan in 1825-1826, a number which included fifty-seven men, twenty women, eighteen children, and twenty-two other male dependents.<sup>31</sup> In 1827-1828, Fort Chipewyan's population, other than Indians, totalled seventy persons, - twenty-four men, seventeen women, twenty-two children, and seven other male dependents.<sup>32</sup> In 1832 there were eighteen men plus their women and children.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1825-1826, B 39/e/9, p. 13. Vide also R. Fleming (ed.), Minutes of Northern Council, p. 103, Resolution 8, July 2, 1825, and p. 142, Resolution 10, June 26, 1826. The Mackenzie River transport became a separate system which meant a saving of £1,200 yearly in costs. Vide ibid., p. 143, Resolutions 17 and 18, and p. xxxvi.

<sup>31</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1825-1826, B 39/e/9, p. 13.

<sup>32</sup>Fort Chipewyan Post Journals, 1827-1828, B 39/a/26, p. 6.

<sup>33</sup>Fort Chipewyan Post Journals, 1831-1834, B 39/a/29, Oct. 8, 1832.



The above facts lead to the conclusion that monopoly conditions allowed a greater efficiency in the trade. The Hudson's Bay Company could reduce the number of its employees, thus lowering wage costs. The North West Company, confronted with two dangerous rivals within the short time of a decade, never developed such an efficient organization. Although its councils attempted to increase efficiency, by reducing the number of dependents at each post,<sup>34</sup> the main, and possibly most successful, policy was to attempt a partial control of wage costs by charging high prices to its employees at the posts.<sup>35</sup> The following tables provide a detailed outline of the wages paid to employees between 1786 and 1835. They indicate the relationship of salaries to times of competition and monopoly. The problem of wage costs and the outcome of attempts to solve it are then discussed.

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<sup>34</sup>W. S. Wallace, Documents, pp. 272, 287.

<sup>35</sup>A. S. Morton, History, p. 353.



TABLE 1

## Athabaska Wage Scheme

<u>Year</u>	<u>Occupation</u> <sup>37</sup>	<u>Livres</u>	<u>Sterling £ (Approximate)</u> <sup>38</sup>
1786 <sup>36</sup> N.W.C.	<u>Milieux</u>	500	20
	<u>Devants</u>	800	33
	<u>Guide</u>	1,000	42
	<u>Commis</u>	600 - 1,000	25 - 42
	<u>Gouvernail</u>	700 - 800	30 - 33

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<sup>36</sup>H.B.C. F 2/1, North West Company Post Journal, 1786, English River. Professor A. S. Morton has left a note with this document. He reasons that the journal is actually one kept at Pond's fort on the Athabaska River. Whether it is or not, the wage scales for English River and Athabaska were probably the same.

<sup>37</sup>

<u>Milieux</u>	- Middlemen
<u>Bouts</u>	- Bowsmen or Steersmen
<u>Devants</u>	- Foremen or Bowsmen
<u>Commis</u>	- Clerks
<u>Gouvernail</u>	- Steersmen

<sup>38</sup>The values and types of currency tend to be confusing. In Canada the French livre and the Spanish dollar were in use. The types of currency commonly mentioned were Canadian (or French) currency, Halifax currency, York currency, Grand Portage currency, and English sterling.

Although Davidson says that Canadian and Halifax currency were the same, Rich states that Halifax currency was only used for accounting purposes. Certainly, these types were of less value than English sterling. The problem here is to make a livre correspond to a sterling value.





After 1796, according to Rich, the following values were accepted:

1 sterling guinea = 21 shillings = 252 pence Sterling value  
 1 sterling guinea = 23s/4d = 280 pence Halifax value  
 1 sterling guinea = 28 livres French currency

5 shillings Halifax = 6 livres French currency

Therefore,

60 pence Halifax = 6 livres French currency  
 10 pence Halifax = 1 livre French currency

If 1 sterling guinea = 28 livres French currency,  
 then 252 pence sterling = 28 livres French currency;  
 and therefore, 9 pence sterling = 1 livre French currency.

Davidson rates 7/8 livre equals 1 shilling.

Rich rates 5/6 livre equals 1 shilling.

Innis rates 1 livre equals 1 shilling, Halifax currency.

Pendergast rates 1 livre equals .833 shillings and 1,000 livres equal  
 to £41.13.4.

Taking 5/6 or 7/8 livre as equal to one shilling, the above conversion from livres to £ sterling has been figured approximately. This conversion allows a better comparison of the variation in wages throughout the period.

Grand Portage currency is explained by Gates (Five Fur Traders of the Northwest, p. 94) twelve units of G.P.C. equals £1 sterling. See 1799, Table 3.

York (New York) currency, according to Rich, rated a dollar to eight shillings. Davidson says it was in use around Toronto and southern and western districts of Upper Canada.



For a fuller account of currency see:

Simpson's Athabaska Journal, p. 186 n.

Davidson, op. cit., p. 202 n.

Innis, The Fur Trade, p. 230 n.

Pendergast, "The XY Company - 1798-1804" Ph.D. thesis, Ottawa, 1957, p. 120.



TABLE 2

<u>Year</u>	<u>Occupation</u>	<u>Livres</u>	<u>Sterling £ (Approximate)</u>
1795 <sup>39</sup> N.W.C.	Men	600 - 1,000	25 - 42
	Guides	1,000 - 3,000	42 - 126
	Interpreters	1,000 - 3,000	42 - 126
	Clerks	100 <sup>40</sup> - 5,000	4 - 210

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<sup>39</sup>Davidson, op. cit., p. 234. He quotes a North West partner in the Athabaska district, probably at Fort Chipewyan, in 1795. His source: Masson Papers, McGill University.

<sup>40</sup>This figure may be an error, unless it applies to apprenticing clerks.

It can be reasonably assumed that Athabaska salaries would be the highest of the districts, cf. Innis, p. 238. This is true after 1821, until the Columbia district was established, cf. Minutes of Northern Council Department, 1821-1831.

As can be seen from the next table (4), wages varied according to ability and length of service.

Wentzell's statement of 1807 helps clarify the table below:

The wages allowed to a clerk at the expiration of a long term of seven years, which he has served for an apprentice for the sum of one hundred pounds for the whole term,\* was formerly the reasonable salary of one hundred pounds per annum....

\*Thus, as an apprentice advanced in his experience, his wages increased accordingly. This explains the wide discrepancies in the wage scale below.





TABLE 3

Arrangements of the Proprietors, clerks, interpreters, & c., of  
the North-West Company in the Indian Departments, 1799,  
(the old Company).

## Athabaska

<u>Year</u>		<u>G.P. Currency</u>	<u>Sterling £</u>
1799 <sup>41</sup> N.W.C.	John Finlay, proprietor.		
	Simon Fraser. . . . .	1,200	100
	James MacKenzie . . . . .	300	25
	Duncan Livingston . . . . .	1,200	100
	John Stewart. . . . .	240	20
	James Porter. . . . .	480	40
	John Thompson . . . . .	240	20
	James MacDougall. . . . .	60	5
	G. F. Wintzel . . . . .	240	20
	John Heinbrucks . . . . .	500	41.6.0
		<hr/>	
		4,460	
	Equipments and necessities for 9 clerks at £20 ...		2,160

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<sup>41</sup>L. Masson, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 61.



TABLE 4

<u>Year</u>	<u>Occupation</u>	<u>Livres</u>	<u>Sterling <math>\pounds</math> (Approximate)</u>
1800 <sup>42</sup> N.W.C.	Foremen	1,200	50
	Steersmen	1,200	50
	Middlemen	800	33

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<sup>42</sup>H. Innis, The Fur Trade, p. 239.

In 1800, James Mackenzie records an interesting note on wages during competition in the Athabaska:

Perronne [of the XY Company] asked him [a North West Company Canadian] how much wages he would ask to which Piche answered 700 livres with several other prerequisites of no great value per year. Here Perronne wisely reprimanded him ... in exacting so little.... I trouve Piche que vous ete bien fou de demander si peu de Gages--Car pour un homme de votre Capacite on ne regardera pas 900 livres pour la premiere annee et 1,000 pour la deuxieme & pour toute autre chose vous serez haute comme le Bourgeois....<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>Journal of James Mackenzie, P.A.C., July 5, 1800.



TABLE 5

<u>Year</u>	<u>Occupation</u>	<u>£</u>
1802 <sup>44</sup> H.B.C.	Foremen	20
	Steersmen	25
	Middlemen	16

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<sup>44</sup> Nottingham House Journals, B 39/a/1, August 7, 1802.

These Bay men were on a one-year trial engagement. Consequently, three middlemen demanded £18 each, an increase of £2 on their previous salary.<sup>45</sup> The wages of the Bay men remained fairly stationary, since more of them were demanding an increase to £18 each in 1805.<sup>46</sup> The man who remained inland in charge of Great Slave Lake during the summer of 1805 also was to receive £18.

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<sup>45</sup> Nottingham House Journals, B 39/a/1, May 16, 1803.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., B 39/a/4, May 23, 1805.





TABLE 6

<u>Year</u>	<u>Occupation</u>	<u>Livres</u>	<u>Sterling £ (Approximate)</u>
1805 <sup>47</sup> N.W.C.	Guides	800	33
	Foremen	500 - 750	20 - 31
	Steersmen	500 - 750	20 - 31
	Middlemen	300 - 550	12 - 22

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<sup>47</sup> Innis, The Fur Trade, p. 239.



TABLE 7

<u>Year</u>	<u>Occupation</u>	<u>Livres</u>	<u>Sterling £ (Approximate)</u>
1806 <sup>48</sup> N.W.C.	<u>Devants</u>	600	25
	<u>Gouvernails</u>	600	25
	<u>Milieux</u>	400	16

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<sup>48</sup>W. S. Wallace, Documents, Minutes of North West Company, 1801-1806, p. 213, July 15.

Wentzell makes an interesting observation a year after the above regulation had been approved:

The prices of common men or Canadians are, by an established rule, never to exceed fifty or sixty pounds, being the highest, the lowest is twenty-five pounds, but few have these low prices.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>Masson, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 95, Wentzell's Letters, Forks, Mackenzie River, March 27, 1807.



TABLE 8

<u>Year</u>	<u>Occupation</u>	<u>£</u>
1807 <sup>50</sup> N.W.C.	Clerks - First Year	60
	Second Year	80
	Third Year	100

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<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

Wentzell adds:

For further wages we must depend upon success in trade and friends in power. Some enjoy an income of two hundred a year; such prices were only given because the times were pressing. [i.e. opposition].





TABLE 9

<u>Year</u>	<u>Occupation</u>	<u>Livres</u>	<u>Sterling £ (Approximate)</u>
1819 <sup>51</sup> N.W.C.	Middlemen	1,000	42
	Boutes (Foremen and Steersmen)	1,400	58
	Interpreters	1,600 - 2,000	66 - 83
	Clerks		150 - 200

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<sup>51</sup>Ibid., pp. 123-124, Wentzell's Letters, Great Slave Lake, April 5, 1819.

Wentzell said that some of the Hudson's Bay clerks were receiving as much as £300.



TABLE 10

<u>Year</u>	<u>Occupation</u>	<u>Livres</u>	<u>Sterling £ (Approximate)</u>
<u>Canadian Scale</u>			
1822 <sup>52</sup> H.B.C.	<u>Boutes</u>	1,800	42
	Middlemen	800	33
	Guides	1,200	50
	Interpreters	up to 1,000	up to 42
<u>European Scale</u>			
	Steersmen		24
	Bowsmen		20
	Middlemen		17
	Guides		up to 30

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<sup>52</sup>Athabaska and Lesser Slave Lake Districts, R. Fleming (ed.), Minutes of Northern Council, p. 26, July 24, 1822, Resolutions 105-107.



TABLE 11

<u>Year</u>	<u>Occupation</u>	<u>£</u>
1823 <sup>53</sup> H.B.C.	Steersmen	24
	Bowsmen	22
	Middlemen	19
	Guides	29
	Interpreters	up to 25
	Mechanics (inland)	up to 24

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<sup>53</sup> Athabaska, McKenzies River, and Lesser Slave Lake Districts, Ibid., p. 65, July 1, 1823, Resolution 1.





TABLE 12

<u>Year</u>	<u>Occupation</u>	<u>£</u>
1825 <sup>54</sup>	Steersmen	24
	Bowsmen (Canoe)	24
	Bowsmen	22
	Middlemen	19
	Guides	29
	Interpreters	15 - 25
	Mechanics (inland)	up to 24
	Boat Builders	up to 30

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<sup>54</sup>Athabaska and New Caledonia Districts, Ibid., pp. 117-118, June 20, 1825, Resolutions 78-81. These wage scales remained in effect until 1836, cf. E. H. Oliver (ed.), The Canadian North-West, its early development and legislative records; Minutes of the Councils of the Red River Colony and the Northern Department of Rupert's Land, P.A.C., no. 9, Ottawa, 1914-1915, vol. 2, p. 749. Hereafter referred to E. Oliver (ed.), The Canadian North-West.



The wages of the men in the service, as shown in the foregoing tables, varied according to the times of monopoly and competition. Excluding guides, the wages of middlemen, foremen and steersmen were set between £20 and £42 prior to 1800 (Tables 1 and 2).<sup>55</sup> After the entry of rival firms, these classes of employees received from £33 to £50 in the North West Company while their English rivals received from £16 to £20 (Tables 4 and 5). At the close of the conflict, their wages fluctuated between £12 and £31 (Table 6). In 1806, the North West Company Council set a schedule for all departments in which canoe men received from £16 to £25 (Table 7). Some doubt as to whether this scale was strictly adhered to, in the Athabaska district at least, is cast by Wentzell's comments (see comment following Table 7). At the height of the opposition in 1819, these wages had risen to £42 and £58, more than double the 1806 schedule (Table 9). Once monopoly control had been resumed, wages were reduced; the Canadian employees received about one-quarter less, from £33 to £50, and Europeans from £17 to £24 (Table 10). The wages of Athabaska boat and canoe men were set in 1823 on a scale from £19 to £24 (Tables 11 and 12), which remained in effect until 1835.<sup>56</sup>

It is obvious that the wages for employees of Athabaska district were a major factor in its costs of operations. In 1817-1818, with 215 men in

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<sup>55</sup> J. B. Tyrrell (ed.), Hearne & Turnor Journals, pp. 122-123. In 1774, Samuel Hearne noted that the Canadians were paying from 20 pounds to 50 pounds for similar services performed in the interior.

<sup>56</sup> E. H. Oliver (ed.), The Canadian North-West, vol. 2, 749.



the department, a total of 76,000 livres were paid, which averages out to 354 livres per man or approximately £14.10 in English sterling.<sup>57</sup>

Alexander Mackenzie stated that transportation costs, in which wages would be a part, were a major part of the Canadian company's expenditures.<sup>58</sup> Both Innis and Davidson have pointed out that monopoly permitted wage control.<sup>59</sup> The Duke of Rochefoucault-Liancourt stated that the men were paid in merchandise at high prices:

In Fort Detroit these articles are sold for three times their usual value in Montreal, in Fort Michillimackinac four times dearer, at the great carrying place [Grand Portage] eight times, at Lake Winnipeg fifteen times; nay the agents fix the prices still higher at their will and pleasure.<sup>60</sup>

He also claimed that 900 men owed the North West Company "more than the amount of ten or fifteen years pay."<sup>61</sup> Because North West currency was one-half the value of Canadian currency an employee would have difficulty in saving money.

Selkirk later made a similar accusation. He estimated the total wage bill for the Canadian company at between £80,000 and £90,000. This

<sup>57</sup>H. A. Innis, The Fur Trade, p. 241.

<sup>58</sup>J. Garvin (ed.), Mackenzie's Voyages, p. 32.

<sup>59</sup>H. A. Innis, The Fur Trade, p. 241.

<sup>60</sup>Duke de la Rochefoucault-Liancourt, Travels Through the United States of North America the Country of the Iroquois and Upper Canada, in the years 1795, 1796 and 1797; with an Authentic Account of Lower Canada, T. Hurst & J. Wallis, London, 1799, p. 330. Hereafter referred to as Liancourt, Travels.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., p. 331.





estimate was based on an average of £40 per employee. If the gross returns of the trade were around the figure of £150,000, then all wages were certainly not paid in cash.<sup>62</sup> If the average wage for Athabaska men was approximately £14 in 1817-1818, then Selkirk's estimate is too high. Professor Morton has shown that both the above accounts were founded upon inaccurate assumptions and figures.

All the same, there is substantial truth in the view that the reduction of the wages of its servants by exploiting them through its trade system helped the Company to discount the disadvantages imposed on it by its long line of transportation, and contributed to putting its business on a profit-making basis.<sup>63</sup>

It is interesting to note that in 1805 the debts of Athabaska River Department employees, who were paid on the same scale as those at Fort Chipewyan, exceeded their credits by 10,453 livres, 2 sols, of debts or approximately £435.10 sterling. At Lac la Pluie, the eastern terminal for Athabaska brigades during the North West Company period, the men's debts exceeded their credits by 25,042 livres, 1 sol, which is about £1,043 sterling.<sup>64</sup> In 1819-1820, 177 men were employed by the Hudson's Bay Company in the district.<sup>65</sup> The total wages (for 175 men) were £8,134.10, an average of £46.9 per man. The debts for 177 men totalled £1,712.1.2, or an average of £9.12.3 per man. Thirty-nine men were free

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<sup>62</sup>G. C. Davidson, op. cit., p. 235.

<sup>63</sup>A. S. Morton, History, p. 354.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., p. 331.

<sup>65</sup>For Chipewyan Account Book, 1819-1820, B 39/d/4a, pp. 28-33.



of debt. What is most interesting is that 119 Canadians had a total debt of 38,500 livres, 14 sols, which averages out to 323 livres (about £19 sterling) a man.

The existence of such a method of controlling wages to reduce costs is brought out in Simpson's journal in 1820,

... had we a good stock of spirits it would work down their extravagant wages, the small quantity sold last night amounts to £43.<sup>66</sup>

In November Simpson reported that three quarters of the men's wages could be retrieved at the post, if a sufficient quantity of rum was supplied.<sup>67</sup> He stressed the need of goods to satisfy the men's demands and mentions, for example, their willingness to pay a guinea a bottle for Madeira wine.<sup>68</sup> Selkirk had claimed that the Northwesters charged their men eight dollars (48 livres) per quart<sup>69</sup> which is quite a reasonable figure compared to the Fort Wedderburn price of

... 60 livers [sic] p.pint or £18 Stg. p. Gallon ... and the people are dissatisfied and unhappy that we have been enabled to indulge them at those prices.<sup>70</sup>

Apparently the North West prices at Fort Chipewyan were no cheaper.

The account book for the men's wages and debts in 1821-1822 reveals that, for the 324 Canadian men listed, their wages totalled 357,829

<sup>66</sup>E. Rich (ed.), Simpson's Athabasca Journal, p. 72, Oct. 2, 1820.

<sup>67</sup>E. Rich (ed.), Simpson's Athabasca Journal, p. 398.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid.

<sup>69</sup>G. C. Davidson, op. cit., p. 235.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid.



livres, 5 sols, or approximately £21,740 sterling, making an average of 1,104 livres, 8 sols (about £66 sterling) a man.<sup>71</sup> The debt of these men amounted to 165,740 livres (about £9,944 sterling), or 511 livres, 1 sol (approximately £30.1.5 sterling) per man. A close analysis of the accounts reveals the following:

	<u>No. of Men</u>
Excessive debts	44
Near Excessive debts	51
High debts	163
Minimal debts	50
Free of debts	15
	<hr/>
	323

A man classed as having excessive debts had debts which exceeded his annual wage. One with near excessive debts had a debt close to his annual pay. A man with high debts was one with a debt ranging from approximately 10 per cent to about 80 per cent of his salary. An employee with a minimal debt owed a debt up to 10 per cent of his salary. Therefore, the number of men in debt immediately following the coalition was relatively high. High prices were partially reducing wage costs.

In 1825-1826, there were forty-two men, excluding officers, at Fort Chipewyan.<sup>72</sup> Their total debt was £191.3.3, which averaged £4.6.2 per man. Only sixteen of the men were in debt. These figures may only represent the advances which the men had received at Fort Chipewyan because debts had increased considerably in five years.

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<sup>71</sup>Fort Chipewyan Account Book, 1821-1822, B 39/d/9, pp. 37-45.

<sup>72</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1825-1826, B 39/e/9, pp. 41-42.





In 1830-1831 there were forty-three men listed at Fort Chipewyan.<sup>73</sup> Their total debts equalled £594.12.1, an average of £13.16.3 per man, which is quite high compared to the wages being paid to them.<sup>74</sup> James Keith favored a policy of wage control through prices of goods. In advocating the re-establishment of Berens House for the Crees, he said:

... the extra expence to be ... the living & wages of an Engagé - an expence which in general estimation I am led to think is much over-rated & often the cause of nominal retrenchments productive of real sacrifices to the Concern, as it generally consists in the amount of Wages of the Individual employed, allowing the gain on the goods supplied him to more than compensate the cost of his subsistence ... on these grounds am I led to believe that a reduction of men is not always a saving of expence much less productive of real advantage, as we often incur heavy risks & sometimes sustain serious losses for the sake of such nominal Petty savings....<sup>75</sup>

In spite of Keith's opinion, however, the attitude of the Hudson's Bay Company toward high debts was revealed in the following letter:

... in consequence of the heavy Debts of the Athabasca men it has been resolved at Norway House that whoever advances the men more than £3 the surplus is to be charged to the private account of the person advancing....<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup>Fort Chipewyan Account Book, 1830-1831, B 39/d/4, pp. 26-27. This account lists Norway House and inland advances which provides a more complete picture than the above mentioned 1825-1826 account.

<sup>74</sup>Supra, Table 12.

<sup>75</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1824-1825, B 39/e/8, p. 5.

<sup>76</sup>The North West Papers, P.A.C., MG 19 A 30, vol. 1, C. N. Bell Collection, Alexander Fisher to Donald Ross, dated Great Slave Lake, Sept. 21, 1841.



The question of wages and equipments complicated the supply of men, especially during times of opposition. Assuming that a man's debts were high, a Company would be loath to discharge his services until he had his debts and credits within a reasonable balance. During competition, when reliable men were in greater demand, the companies would be quite reluctant to terminate engagements. This was obviously the situation at Fort Chipewyan.

He [Courtois, a Canadian] engaged for four years which with 2 he was engaged before make him six - Tho' Contrary to my orders I have this man his 4 phials in Goods as he owes a great deal and was in want of things which I did not like to add to his Acct - He promised to tell it to no body.<sup>77</sup>

Courtois apparently broke his promise since, five days later, another middleman was hired under similar conditions.<sup>78</sup> Mackenzie's journal has evidence to show that when men's engagements were renewed they were allowed four phials of rum as part of his equipment. The custom was still in practice in 1819.<sup>79</sup>

In 1816 John McGillivray succinctly stated the problem of wages, debts and contracts:

A number of our men's agreements expire this year, They will no doubt, according to custom, make it their province to extort as has been invariably the case on all similar occasions, I am sorry I cannot pass any high encomiums on them, the Generality of them being but a Set of poor Dols

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<sup>77</sup> James Mackenzie's Journal, P.A.C., Jan. 7, 1800. In 1822, Simpson, although urged by the Committee to reduce prices, held the opinion that as long as high wages were paid, high prices must be charged. Cf., his Journal, p. 72n.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., Jan. 12, 1800.

<sup>79</sup> Fort Chipewyan Post Journals, 1819-1820, B 39/a/15, Oct. 8, 1819.



all the Good men were sent away by the Express orders and injunctions of the Agents, as they were in the habit of saving a little money, and few retained except drones and drivellers.<sup>80</sup>

The remarks of Simpson in his 1821 journal and report are quite similar to McGillivray's.<sup>81</sup>

The policy of high wages and high prices was discontinued after 1821. Simpson and the Council took steps by renewing:

... the Contracts of a great many who are in debt and as an inducement to accept the terms, we have in all cases of doubtful Debts remitted of the old Debt in the ratio of 200 livres p. Annum for every 100 they relinquish of the price of the Post to which they are attached....<sup>82</sup>

Significantly, Simpson also reported that "Canadians not in Debt whose Engagements expire this Season have been discharged..."<sup>83</sup> which indicates a policy not unlike that of the North West agents. In 1825 Canadians with debts exceeding 1,000 livres were induced to rehire for three years on the European scale.<sup>84</sup> After the adjustment to a European wage and price scale had taken place, the management of personnel was made more efficient. In 1833, Chief Factor John Charles wrote in the Fort Chipewyan journal:

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<sup>80</sup>Selkirk Papers, P.A.C., MG 19 E 1(1), vol. 30, 9144, John McGillivray to William McGillivray, dated Dunvegan, Jan. 17, 1816.

<sup>81</sup>E. Rich (ed.), Simpson's Athabaska Journal, pp. 2, 358-359, 398-399.

<sup>82</sup>R. Fleming (ed.), Minutes of Northern Council, Appendix II, p. 347, Simpson to Governor and Committee, dated York Factory, July 31, 1822.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., p. 349.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., p. 118, July 2, 1825, Resolution 82.





Spoke to the men about Engaging; two declined and two others were so obliged to agree because we cannot furnish them with a passage outwards.<sup>85</sup>

- a problem of less consequence than one of debt-ridden employees. In fact, there is little mention made of engagements in the journals, which could be an indication of a satisfactory system.

The importance of clerks is noted by John McGillivray who stated, in 1815, that if the clerks who wished to leave the district were not enticed to remain by salary increases, then "we may as well Deliver up the Country at once to our opponents."<sup>86</sup> Their role is also strongly emphasized in Simon McGillivray's<sup>87</sup> reply to Colin Robertson at Fort Chipewyan after the latter had asked what the Northwesters would do if some of the winterers left the Canadian company: "The Clerks, Mr. Robertson, we have all them to a man, we have active clerks too, and only want a few heads."<sup>88</sup> Robertson also stressed that the Athabaska district needed "every disposeable [sic] clerk" if the English company's trade was to be placed upon a sound footing.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>85</sup>Fort Chipewyan Post Journals, B 39/a/29, June 1, 1833.

<sup>86</sup>Selkirk Papers, P.A.C., MG 19 E 1(1), vol. 30, 9144, John McGillivray to William McGillivray.

<sup>87</sup>Simon McGillivray, Junior. For a brief biography see E. Rich (ed.), Simpson's Athabaska Journal, Appendix A, p. 451.

<sup>88</sup>E. Rich (ed.), Robertson's Letters, p. 81, No. 22, C. Robertson to G. Moffat, dated Fort Chipewyan, Feb., 1819.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid.



The salaries paid to clerks are interesting since these men were eligible for promotion to a partnership. Table 2 shows a wide variation in the clerks' salaries. As has been mentioned in a note accompanying the Table, the low figure of 100 livres could have been a copying error, or it may apply to apprentice clerks.<sup>90</sup> Table 3 indicates the latter case is most probable. In 1807 (Table 8) the salaries have been reduced to a maximum of £100 for a first class clerk.<sup>91</sup> In 1819 clerks' salaries were raised to £150 - £200 (Table 9).

After the coalition of 1821, there was an interesting exchange of correspondence between Simpson and the Committee on salaries. With regard to clerks, the Governor and Committee proposed the following scale for four classes of clerks.<sup>92</sup>

<u>Class</u>	<u>£ Sterling</u>
1st	150
2nd	120
3rd	100
4th	50 - 75

The London proposal was made in consideration of the many experienced clerks in the country who, they felt, were worth more than newly appointed clerks.

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<sup>90</sup>Supra, Table 2.

<sup>91</sup>A first class clerk was one who had at least 3 years experience as a clerk.

<sup>92</sup>R. Fleming (ed.), Minutes of Northern Council, Appendix A, p. 305, The Governor and Committee to Simpson, London, Feb. 27, 1822.



In reply, Simpson, on behalf of the Council, stated that the scale was set "too high" and made the following counter-proposal.<sup>93</sup>

<u>Class</u>	<u>£ Sterling</u>
1st	100
2nd	75
3rd	60
4th	40

Simpson probably carried his point when he said that several clerks had renewed their contracts on the above terms, "which seem to give entire satisfaction, and in most cases the advance on their former salaries is considerable ..."<sup>94</sup> The proposed scale is not much higher than the 1807 scale set by the North West Company (Table 8). Although the evidence is not conclusive, some doubt must be expressed that there would be complete satisfaction with the new arrangements. F. Wentzell, writing from Mackenzie River in 1824, affirmed the fact that "the North-West is now beginning to be ruled with an iron rod."<sup>95</sup>

In all fairness to Simpson and the Council, it must be mentioned that in a letter to The Governor and Committee, dated York Factory, August 5, 1822, he told of what appears to be a wholesale dismissal of clerks for reasons of inexperience, age, drink, and dishonesty.<sup>96</sup> Only

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<sup>93</sup>Ibid., p. 346, Simpson to the Governor and Committee, York Factory, July 31, 1822.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid.

<sup>95</sup>Masson, op. cit., vol. 1, Wentzell's Letters, p. 150, dated Mackenzie's River, March 1, 1824.

<sup>96</sup>R. Fleming, Minutes of Northern Council, Appendix A, pp. 357-358. Cf., E. Rich (ed.), Robertson's Letters, p. 119.





a limited number remained in the Company's employ, an indication of Simpson's desire to operate the new concern on a sound business basis. Clerks were to have a "respectable Education" and "capacity of body and mind" to assume more important postings. Dissatisfaction with clerks also shows that the North West Company did have inefficient officers in its ranks, as John McGillivray claimed in 1816.<sup>97</sup> Although the evidence gives an incomplete picture, it is sufficient to suggest one reason, however minor, for the dissension of the wintering partners which led to the collapse of the North West Company in the last Athabaska conflict.<sup>98</sup>

The great distance which separated the Athabaska region from most of the comforts of society was probably a key factor in determining personnel for the district. This is emphasized by the remarks of a Northwester in 1795.

Gentlemen in Canada seem very fond of recommending their youthful friends to this country; but if they knew and considered the many disadvantages attending a young man in these distant regions they certainly would rather keep them at home. A Clerk here must serve a long time for a trifle, and after all in spite of abilities, friends or money, must either remain dependent on the Company's<sup>99</sup> pleasure, leave the country or take the road to ruin.

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<sup>97</sup> Supra, p. 32.

<sup>98</sup> Cf., A. S. Morton, op. cit., pp. 613-614; E. Rich, History, pp. 385 ff.; E. Rich (ed.), Robertson's Letters, p. xcix.

<sup>99</sup> As quoted in G. C. Davidson, op. cit., p. 234, his source is Masson Papers, no. 2370, item 3, pp. 51-52, McGill University.



Alexander Mackenzie, a leading authority on the region at the time, had little good to say on the place:

I am fully bent upon going down [i.e. from the Athabaska], for I think it unpardonable for any body to remain in this country who can leave it. What a pretty situation I am in this winter, starving and alone, without the power of doing myself or any body else any good.<sup>100</sup>

His attitude, that of a partner entitled to a full share in the Company's profits, must certainly have been shared by many of those clerks who, at a lesser salary, depended more and more upon the favours of the Montreal agents for promotion. After the coalition of the Canadian companies in 1804, the opportunities for advancement became even more limited.

The letters of W. Ferdinand Wentzell reveal some of the discontent which a clerk must have harbored toward his employers in the early nineteenth century. Wentzell spent much of his fur trade career in the Athabaska district. He wrote in a lengthy dispatch, to Roderick Mackenzie that:

... we [clerks] are flattered and feed ourselves upon the hope of once being admitted to a share in the Company, which, only friends and merit can procure.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Masson, op. cit., vol. 1, Reminiscences of R. Mackenzie, p. 44, A. Mackenzie to R. Mackenzie dated Fort Chipewyan, Jan. 13, 1794. The remarks also give a hint to the ambitious character of Alexander Mackenzie.

<sup>101</sup> c.f., W. S. Wallace, Documents, p. 505 for brief biography. His name was apparently spelled in 2 ways Wentzel and Wentzell; c.f., Wallace, Documents, p. 505, Rich (ed.), Simpson's Athabaska Journal, p. 472 and Masson op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 67, 1105.



Wentzell also stated in the same letter that the late competition of the two companies had benefited those who were "roguish in private and dissemblers in public"<sup>102</sup> since they were:

... advanced to what their merits otherwise would not have entitled them, others, honest characters, let their abilities be ever so great ... must think themselves happy in having the good fortune to gather the rags and be allowed the approaches of these dissembling courtiers.<sup>103</sup>

If Wentzell's accusation is correct, then, the Company's efficiency must have suffered in the period after 1804 and up to the final conflict.

To H. A. Innis the North West Company,

... depended for its success on the individuality, self-reliance, and bargaining ability of each man. Surveillance from headquarters was impossible. It was adapted to secure from each partner the whole-hearted interest of the concern. The North West Company was designed to secure promotion which depended primarily on the ability of the trader to secure returns.<sup>104</sup>

F. Wentzell was not happy about the methods nor decreasing opportunities for promotion in the remote Athabaska district.<sup>105</sup>

Assuming that there were few chances of promotion to partnership, what happens to morale and efficient trading methods? They would most certainly decline and the "ability of the trader to secure returns" would suffer from a lack of motivation. The North West Company thus had

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<sup>102</sup>Masson, op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 94-95, Wentzell's Letters, Forks, Mackenzie River, March 27, 1807.

<sup>103</sup>Ibid.

<sup>104</sup>H. A. Innis, The Fur Trade, p. 248.

<sup>105</sup>Masson, op. cit., vol. 1, Wentzell's Letters.





a problem not unlike its English rivals, namely that a clerk on salary with little hope of promotion or better pay is not likely to pursue vigorously increased returns. Three to five proprietors in the vast Athabaska territory could not maintain a close check on trading methods, accounts, and transportation costs. Clerks like Wentzell may have resigned themselves to small pay but they would show less concern for their employer's interest. The discontent in the Athabaska came from a lack of interest on the part of the clerks who were supposed to serve the company with unflagging loyalty.

The wage charts and the discussion following them have shown that the price of labor was high at Fort Chipewyan, especially when fur trade companies opposed one another. By setting high prices on goods, the companies were able to control the cost. An unfortunate consequence was the quality of the men who were employed. Wages and their control, however, must rank lower in importance than the amount of furs produced.

The Hudson's Bay Company was the first to monopolize the trade coming from the Athabaska country. The Cree and Chipewyan middlemen organization initiated by James Knight in 1715 led to the establishment of Churchill as an important post.<sup>106</sup> Hearne reported that the trade between the Northern Indians (Chipewyans), who acted as traders, and the Far Indians (Dogribs and Copper) varied between 6,000 and 11,000

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<sup>106</sup>E. Rich (ed.), History, vol. 1, p. 436; vol. 2, p. 115. See also A. S. Morton, History, pp. 289, 296, 299.



Made Beaver annually.<sup>107</sup> The disruption of this system by Canadian traders caused Hearne, at a later date, to estimate: "... the Hudson's Bay Company have now lost every shadow of a future trade from that quarter."<sup>108</sup> It is apparent then, that the Hudson's Bay Company profited from the trade prior to the invasion of the 'Pedlars'.

The following tables (I to VIII) and discussion of some of the outfits and returns in the Athabaska district as related to Fort Chipewyan will show its importance in the trade.

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<sup>107</sup>R. Glover (ed.), Hearne's Journeys, p. 115. The term Made Beaver meant one "full-grown beaver skin the standard by which all furs were rated." Ibid., pp. 114-115.

<sup>108</sup>Ibid., p. 116n.



TABLE I<sup>109</sup>

## Athabaska Outfits and Returns

1778 - Peter Pond

Outfit

<u>No. of Canoes</u>	<u>Men</u>	<u>Estimated Pieces<sup>110</sup> of Trade Goods</u>
5	25	100

Returns

<u>No. of Packs</u>	<u>Weight of Pack</u>	<u>Made Beaver</u>	<u>Estimated Value<sup>111</sup></u>
140	90 lbs.	8,400	£8,400

<sup>109</sup>Cumberland House Journals Second Series, 1779-1782, Hudson's Bay Record Society, vol. 15, pp. 6 and 6n, July 2, 1779. E. E. Rich, History, vol. 2, p. 76.

<sup>110</sup>A "piece" refers to a 90-lb. bale of trade goods.

<sup>111</sup>The estimated value of these tables is based upon the value of a fur pack as varying between £30 to £90 sterling. vide, Appendix A. An average of £60 per pack has been set. The estimated value does not mean gross or net profit. See Appendix A.

In 1789 Alexander Mackenzie told the North West agents:

You will observe by the amount of the Goods remaining here that there are more than sufficiency [sic] for another year --Therefore it will be needless to send any more canoes in, than will be required to carry out the Returns--Eight with three of the five Canoes that remains [sic] in hand will carry more that the Country will produce.<sup>112</sup>

<sup>112</sup>Masson, op. cit., vol. 1, Reminiscences of R. Mackenzie, p. 30, A. Mackenzie to Agents of the North West Company, dated Athabaska, May 22, 1789.





Eleven canoes of furs would carry about 220 packs of furs<sup>113</sup> with an approximate value of £13,200.

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<sup>113</sup>The estimate is based upon an average of 20 packs per canoe. Cf., W. S. Wallace, Documents, p. 252.



TABLE II<sup>114</sup>

1792 - North West Company

Outfit

not given

<u>Returns</u>	<u>No. of Packs</u>	<u>Estimated Value</u>
Slave Lake	54	£3,240
Peace River	150	£9,000
Athapescow Lake	90	£5,400
Athapescow River	25	£1,500
		<u>Total</u> £19,140

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<sup>114</sup>J. B. Tyrrell (ed.), Hearne and Turnor Journals, p. 452, May, 1792. Turnor reasoned that the expenses for this trade, after leaving Lake Superior (which included 25 per cent advance on the "English Invoice" of trade goods), of goods and provisions did not exceed £700, plus wages of £500. He further estimated that for 20,000 or more Made Beaver the Pedlars' total expense to and from London would not be much more than £3,000.

... they carry from the North of Cumberland House between Forty and Fifty Thousand made Beaver every year ... I have heard some of them declare that while they can draw the attention of the Honble Company's servants up the Sask-ash-a-wan or to Southern parts they can afford to oppose them at a trifling loss so long as they can keep the North to themselves.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>115</sup>Ibid., p. 457.



Towards the close of the eighteenth century Alexander Mackenzie exultantly noted, while discussing hostilities among Indian tribes:

... yet from the manner that they are all distributed it will not injure the returns of the year in my opinion they will exceed those of the last which was the greatest we ever had.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>116</sup>North West Company Letter Book, 1798-1802, P.A.C., MG 19 B 1, Alexander Mackenzie to Messrs. McTavish Frobisher & Co., dated Mackinac, June 4, 1799. Mackenzie is specifically referring to the returns of the Athabaska department.





TABLE III<sup>117</sup>

## 1800-1806 North West, XY, and Hudson Bay companies

1799-1800

	<u>Outfit</u>			<u>Returns</u>	
	<u>No. of Pieces</u>	<u>Men</u>		<u>No. of Packs</u>	<u>Estimated Value (£)</u>
NW Co.	240	126		648	38,840
XY Co.	70	-		2	120

1801-1802

	<u>Outfit</u>			<u>Returns</u>	
	<u>No. of Pieces</u>	<u>Men</u>		<u>No. of Packs</u>	<u>Estimated Value (£)</u>
NW Co.	-	-		-	-
XY Co.	150*	-		10	600

1802-1803

	<u>Outfit</u>			<u>Returns</u>	
	<u>No. of Pieces</u>	<u>Men</u>		<u>No. of Packs</u>	<u>Estimated Value (£)</u>
NW Co.	700*	-		182	10,920
XY Co.	250*	-		31	1,860
HB Co.	100*	18		6 small bundles-253 6 M Br	255

1803-1804

	<u>Outfit</u>			<u>Returns</u>	
	<u>No. of Pieces</u>	<u>Men</u>		<u>No. of Packs</u>	<u>Estimated Value (£)</u>
NW Co.	600*	195		315	18,900
XY Co.	250*	83		84	5,040
HB Co.	100*	-		M Br 463	463

1804-1805

	<u>Outfit</u>			<u>Returns</u>	
	<u>No. of Pieces</u>	<u>Men</u>		<u>No. of Packs</u>	<u>Estimated Value (£)</u>
NW Co.	600*	-		19 loaded canoes* (380)	22,800
XY Co.	275*	-		-	-
HB Co.	100*	9		M Br 164	164

<sup>117</sup> Table 3 has been compiled from Nottingham House Journals, 1801-1806, H. B. Arch., B 39/a/2, B 39/a/3, B 39/a/4. The XY outfit for 1799-1800 is taken from A. N. McLeod's journal in C. M. Gates (ed.), Five Fur Traders (1965 ed.), p. 142, Dec. 17, 1800.

\*Indicates an estimated number of pieces.



In August, 1805, at Ile-a-la-Crosse, Peter Fidler wrote in his journal that a total of thirty-seven canoes were destined for "these Northern parts".<sup>118</sup> English River and Athabaska River were allowed thirteen canoes in the 1806 outfit.<sup>119</sup> The 1805 outfit probably had a similar arrangement; there would then be about twenty-four canoes outfitted for Fort Chipewyan.

Between 1806 and 1813, the returns of the district are not available. Some of the outfits are known, however, and these give a partial indication of its importance.

According to the 1806 outfit up to forty canoes could have gone to Fort Chipewyan. Innis says that fifty-three out of a total of 156 canoes were sent to Athabaska, Athabaska River, and English River districts.<sup>120</sup> The North West Company Minutes show six canoes for Athabaska River, and seven for English River. They also list seventeen Montreal canoes for Lac la Pluie and seven Athabaska canoes, a total of twenty-three.<sup>121</sup> Assuming that Montreal canoes were canots de maitre, capable of carrying up to four tons, then canots du nord, with a capacity of two tons, would be used from Lac la Pluie to Fort Chipewyan. Hence,

<sup>118</sup> Nottingham House Journals, B 39/a/5a, August, 1805.

<sup>119</sup> W. S. Wallace, Documents, p. 222, Minutes of North West Company, July 30, 1806.

<sup>120</sup> H. Innis, The Fur Trade, p. 229, His source is apparently Northwest Company Minutes, P.A.C., p. 58.

<sup>121</sup> W. S. Wallace, Documents, p. 222.



the number of these North canoes would be  $17 \times 2$  equals 34, plus the other six Athabaska canoes equals forty canoes. Of course it is probable that some of this freight was kept at the Lac la Pluie depot. Innis also said that 1,083 pieces of trade goods were sent to Athabaska, Athabaska River, and English River districts.<sup>122</sup> With an approximate average of twenty-five pieces per canoe, the two latter districts received about  $(13 \times 25)$  325 pieces, leaving 758 pieces for Fort Chipewyan. Twenty-six canoes could carry this many pieces.

In 1809, twenty-six out of eighty-eight canoes were destined for Fort Chipewyan, and in 1810 twenty-six out of a total of ninety-two canoes were arranged for the district.<sup>123</sup>

Colin Robertson reported to the Governor and Committee in 1810 that:

They [North West Company] calculate and with reason, that Athabasca of itself, if managed with economy, which they can easily do when free from opposition, will yield them a profit of £20,000 per annum, and if I include the English River and Lesser Slave Lake I may without exaggeration add £10,000 more.<sup>124</sup>

Between 1808 and 1810 the North West Company's returns averaged £102,925. 11.8.<sup>125</sup> Thus the Athabaska district's contribution was a sizable part of the returns.

<sup>122</sup> H. Innis, The Fur Trade, p. 229.

<sup>123</sup> W. S. Wallace, Documents, Minutes of the North West Company, pp. 260-261, 264-265.

<sup>124</sup> Quoted in E. Rich (ed.), Robertson's Letters, p. xxvi, Jan. 10, 1810.

<sup>125</sup> H. Innis, The Fur Trade, p. 258.





Fur trade historians have assumed that competition between rival fur companies rapidly depleted fur regions,<sup>126</sup> the corollary being that higher prices would induce the natives to hunt more furs. This assumption has been disposed of by Professor Rich.<sup>127</sup> The destruction of fur-bearing animals on a large scale occurred not, as formerly supposed, in competitive periods, but rather during monopolistic conditions. In 1812, there were reports of decreased returns in all regions.<sup>128</sup> George Keith spoke of poor returns from Mackenzie River in the Athabaska district in 1808, 1810, and 1815.<sup>129</sup> Ferdinand Wentzell confirms these reports,<sup>130</sup> as does John McGillivray in telling of "the exhausted and impoverished state of the Country."<sup>131</sup>

In spite of the statements of these experienced winterers, the returns were quite profitable up until 1819.<sup>132</sup> And in his 1821 report Simpson wrote:

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<sup>126</sup>A. S. Morton, History, p. 463. G. C. Davidson op. cit., p. 168.

<sup>127</sup>E. Rich, "Trade Habits".

<sup>128</sup>G. C. Davidson, op. cit., p. 173.

<sup>129</sup>L. Masson, op. cit., vol. 2, Letters to Roderick Mackenzie, 1807-1817, pp. 79, 92, 129.

<sup>130</sup>Masson, op. cit., vol. 1, Wentzell's Letters, dated Mackenzie River, Feb. 28, 1814. He is referring to the Athabaska country.

<sup>131</sup>Selkirk Papers, P.A.C., MG 19 E 1(1), vol. 30, 9105, John McGillivray to J. D. Cameron, dated Dunvegan, Jan. 8, 1814.

<sup>132</sup>Infra, p. 60.



... the returns would for several years to come, if the Indians resume their industrious habits be very considerable, as the country is now according to Indian report as it has been at any time within their recollection, so that there is still an ample harvest in Store for those who weather the Storm of Opposition.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>133</sup>E. Rich (ed.), Simpson's Athabasca Journal, p. 364.



TABLE IV

	<u>Returns</u> <u>No. of Packs</u>	<u>sterling</u> <u>Approximate value</u>
1814 <sup>134</sup>	380	22,800
<hr/>		
<sup>134</sup> L. Masson, <u>op. cit.</u> , vol. 1, Wentzell's Letters, p. 114.		
1815 <sup>135</sup>	400	24,000
<hr/>		
<sup>135</sup> <u>Ibid.</u> , p. 117.		
John Clark told Roderick Mackenzie, a clerk, that Fort Chipewyan yielded from 100 to 180 packs of fur. <u>Cf.</u> Fort Chipewyan Post Journal, B 39/a/6, Aug. 15, 1815.		
1816 <sup>136</sup>	400	24,000
<hr/>		
<sup>136</sup> Selkirk Papers, P.A.C., MG E 1(1), vol. 28, 8591, A. McLellan to J. McTavish, dated Bas de la Riviere, July 20, 1816.		
According to the 1816-1817 journal at Fort Wedderburn, the North West Company had thirty-two canoes of goods against eleven of the Hudsons' Bay Company. <u>Cf.</u> Selkirk Papers, <u>loc. cit.</u> , vol. 71, 18644, Oct. 6, 1816.		
1817 <sup>137</sup>	380	22,800
<hr/>		
<sup>137</sup> L. Masson, <u>op. cit.</u> , vol. 1, Wentzell's Letters, p. 119.		
1818 <sup>138</sup>	430	25,800
<hr/>		
<sup>138</sup> <u>Ibid.</u> , p. 119.		





George Simpson said that the returns for Fort Chipewyan averaged 120 packs of valuable beaver before the Bay men entered the territory.<sup>139</sup> William Brown, District Master at Fort Wedderburn, said, in his report, the returns averaged between seventy and 115 packs of fur. In 1819-1820, however, Brown claimed the Northwesters only took out ten packs of fur, and he guessed that they would only get twenty packs in 1820-1821.<sup>140</sup>

The North West trade at Fort Chipewyan thus suffered severe losses in the years leading up to 1821. There are several reasons for this collapse, some of which have been discussed. The increasing scarcity of fur prior to the entry of the Hudson's Bay Company is a possible factor, although certainly a minor one when one considers Simpson's report that the district held promises of profits if a monopoly were restored.<sup>141</sup>

A major reason was the lack of preparedness on the part of the North West Company for opposition. Although Simon McGillivray<sup>142</sup> had warned the North West agents in 1811 that the Bay men were preparing to invade the Athabaska and stressed the need of sending in extra trade goods through Hudson Bay,<sup>143</sup> George Keith wrote, in obvious disgust in 1816:

<sup>139</sup>E. Rich, Simpson's Athabasca Journal, p. 363.

<sup>140</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1820-1821, B 39/e/3, p. 20.

<sup>141</sup>Infra, p. 53.

<sup>142</sup>Brother of William McGillivray.

<sup>143</sup>Selkirk Papers, loc. cit., vol. 30, 9114-9116, Simon McGillivray to McTavish, McGillivrays & Company, dated London, June 1, 1811.



At no previous period was the N.W. Co. provided to repel an opposition so disadvantageously. For several preceeding [sic] years the Country was starved in Goods, which fostered discontent among the Natives and our Outfit in Dry Goods was still less than usual and miserably deficient.<sup>144</sup>

The North West Company thus displayed a lack of sound management in supplying the needs of the district. This situation was aggravated by the need of more men, and the desire of too many wintering officers to go out in the summer to Fort William.<sup>145</sup> Colin Robertson's extravagant display of trade goods and man,<sup>146</sup> in effect, defeated the Northwesters at their own game. He fully realized that the key to winning the Athabaska trade lay in gaining the trade loyalties of the Indians.<sup>147</sup> An example of North West inefficiency occurred in 1816 when trade goods failed to reach Lac la Pluie before the departure of the brigades for Fort Chipewyan:

... ten loaded Canoes had left this place for Athabasca and had the necessary goods arrived in time more than double that number would have been off.<sup>148</sup>

A similar condition occurred in 1818:

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<sup>144</sup> Selkirk Papers, P.A.C., MG 19 E 1(1), vol. 29, 8794, George Keith to Thomas Thain, dated Fort William, July 26, 1816. Keith is discussing the Athabaska district.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid. See also North West Company Correspondence, 1800-1827, H.B.C. Arch., F 3/2, p. 170, Simon McGillivray (Junior) to Angus Shaw, dated Fort Chipewyan, Nov. 15, 1818.

<sup>146</sup> The 1814-1815 expedition cost the Hudson's Bay Company well over £10,000. E. Rich (ed.), Robertson's Letters, p. lxxiv.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., p. lxxxiv.

<sup>148</sup> Selkirk Papers, P.A.C., MG 19 E 1(1), vol. 28, 8697, John Stuart to James Grant, dated Lac la Pluie, Aug. 7, 1816.





The outfit is however rather scanty for want of hands to take in the goods necessary for the trade. This has been occasioned by a bungling error of Mr. Rocheblave, the acting agent at Fort William....<sup>149</sup>

William Brown also reported that "the Indians have already lost a great deal of the high opinion they had of them" because of the scarcity of trade goods in 1820 and 1821.<sup>150</sup>

In 1818 the North West Company failed to get their brigades to Fort Chipewyan before the Hudson's Bay Company's.<sup>151</sup> The result was a large defection of Indians from the North West Company's fort.<sup>152</sup> The North West canoes destined for posts beyond Fort Chipewyan failed to reach their quarters because of freeze-up.<sup>153</sup> John McTavish sent twenty-five men to carry supplies to Fort Vermilion.<sup>154</sup>

Although the Northwesters were in earlier with the 1819-1820 outfit,<sup>155</sup> disaster of a different nature hampered the trade at Fort Chipewyan.

<sup>149</sup>L. Masson, op. cit., vol. 1, Wentzell's Letters, p. 120, dated Lac la Pluie, Aug. 4, 1818.

<sup>150</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1820-1821, B 39/e/3, p. 24.

<sup>151</sup>North West Company Correspondence, 1800-1827, H.B.C. Arch., F 3/2, p. 168, Simon McGillivray (Junior) to Angus Shaw, dated Fort Chipewyan, Oct. 4, 1818.

<sup>152</sup>Ibid. Robert Miles' notes confirms this event in Fort Chipewyan Post Journals, B 39/a/14, Oct. 3, 1818.

<sup>153</sup>North West Company Correspondence, 1800-1827, loc. cit., p. 176, J. G. McTavish to North West Proprietors, dated Peace River, Dec. 13, 1818.

<sup>154</sup>Ibid., p. 177.

<sup>155</sup>Fort Chipewyan Post Journals, B 39/a/15, Oct. 6, 1819.





Measles and the whooping cough struck the Indian population in epidemic proportions in the Athabaska district.<sup>156</sup> The poor returns of 1820 were a result of these illnesses.<sup>157</sup> The presence of William Todd,<sup>158</sup> a surgeon, assisted the Hudson's Bay Company's campaign at Fort Wedderburn.

The evidence indicates that management was a major factor in the Athabaska contest. Colin Robertson was correct when he said the North West Company could make a profit at Fort Chipewyan "if managed with economy, which they can easily do when free from opposition...."<sup>159</sup> His conviction that the Northwesters were "commercial monopolists", incapable of successfully trading against serious competition, proved correct.<sup>160</sup> His goal of alienating the Indians from the North West Company succeeded. The second stage of the campaign - to win them to the English company - was not yet completed when George Simpson arrived

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., Oct. 27, Dec. 20, Jan. 18, Jan. 27, Feb. 2, Mar. 16. Also Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1820-1821, B 39/e/3, p. 20. According to Wentzell, these sicknesses made their appearance with German settlers in 1819 at Selkirk's Red River colony. He said that one-fifth of the Indian population died as a result. L. Masson, op. cit., vol. 1, Wentzell's Letters, p. 130, dated Great Slave Lake, May 23, 1820.

<sup>157</sup> Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1820-1821, B 39/e/3, p. 20.

<sup>158</sup> E. Rich (ed.), Robertson's Letters, pp. 269, 272. For a brief biography see E. Rich (ed.), Simpson's Athabasca Journal, Appendix B, pp. 471-472.

<sup>159</sup> Quoted in E. Rich (ed.), Robertson's Letters, p. xxvi. The underlined emphasis is mine.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., p. xciv.



on the scene in 1820. The Indians, exploiting the favors of the companies, became independent of both.<sup>161</sup> The task of management after 1821 was to reorganize and recover from the damaging effects of competition.<sup>162</sup>

The trade at Fort Chipewyan, which became the quarters of the amalgamated company, was not as badly harmed as was feared. Simpson wrote in 1822 that:

The Indians ... were in a state of great disorganization .... A system of moderate economy has been generally observed ... things will in the course of a year or two revert to their original good order.<sup>163</sup>

Edward Smith, Chief Factor at Fort Chipewyan from 1821 to 1823, stated that the Indians appeared willing to return to industrious habits and:

Altho there is a great concourse of Indians at this place still we have no complaint so far against them - they have strived to please and if it had not been for the ever restless and disappointed halfbreeds perhaps they would have done better.<sup>164</sup>

The disadvantages which hampered a successful trade were the "confusion in which things was [sic] last year ... the heavy burthen of servants on this District ... "<sup>165</sup> The Peace River country was largely depleted

<sup>161</sup>E. Rich (ed.), Simpson's Athabasca Journal, p. 358.

<sup>162</sup>Ibid., pp. 355-356.

<sup>163</sup>R. Fleming (ed.), Minutes of Northern Council, Appendix II, p. 338, G. Simpson to Governor and Committee, dated York Factory, July 16, 1822.

<sup>164</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1821-1822, B 39/e/4, p. 7.

<sup>165</sup>Ibid. See above for discussion of the problem of reducing the number of employees.



of furs, a condition caused by freemen and Iroquois.<sup>166</sup> The Beaver Indians were trapping beaver in the spring "when every female killed is then the loss of from 3 to 5 Beaver."<sup>167</sup> In contrast to the condition of the Peace River region, Smith described the Great Slave Lake area as better than a few years ago because the Indians had killed fewer beaver.<sup>168</sup>

During the competition a great number of Indians, attracted by the opportunity of getting more easily available trade goods, had gathered about the forts. The concern of the management after the coalition was to reduce these numbers. The population list of 1822 reveals that there were 591 Chipewyans and 102 Crees at Fort Chipewyan, making 693 Indian people out of a total of 2,150 for the entire district.<sup>169</sup> In his 1823 report, Smith spoke of the attempt to disperse the Indians:

... the Elk River, Bark River in Clear Lake, the Lower parts of Peace River, and Fond du Lac Athabaska, has been alternately tried for this purpose but without answering expectations.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> The freemen and Iroquois rapidly depleted fur fields by indiscriminate killing of animals, young and old, in all seasons. Their role in the fur trade requires further study. Cf. A. S. Morton, History, p. 355, and E. Rich (ed.), Simpson's Athabasca Journal, p. 384.

<sup>167</sup> Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1821-1822, B 39/e/4, p. 8.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1822-1823, B 39/e/5, p. 2.





He said that an attempt would be made to establish some of them at Hay River in the coming year.<sup>171</sup> Smith's endeavours were apparently to no avail since there were 593 Chipewyans and sixty Crees listed at Fort Chipewyan in 1824.<sup>172</sup> About one-half of the Crees had:

... partly buoyed up & self deluded by the expectation of seeing Strangers had thought proper to decamp Southward....<sup>173</sup>

Some Crees still anticipated a return to the good times of competition!

James Keith, Chief Factor at Fort Chipewyan from 1823 to 1826, also realized that too many Indians were congregated about the post. He also intended to send some of them towards Hay River. A group was also encouraged to hunt furs around the western end of Great Slave Lake.<sup>174</sup> In 1826 he reported that some Indians had returned to the barren lands.<sup>175</sup> The number of Indians receiving advances gradually declined. In 1825 128 Indians were outfitted<sup>176</sup> and only about eighty-two were given advances in 1834.<sup>177</sup>

<sup>171</sup>Ibid.

<sup>172</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1823-1824, B 39/e/6, p. 3. The Chipewyans numbered 243 men, 160 women, 100 boys, and 90 girls; the Crees included 16 men, 14 women, and 30 children.

<sup>173</sup>Fort Chipewyan Post Journals, 1823-1824. Copy of Letters relating to Athabasca, B 39/a/22, James Keith and Peter Dease to Governor, Chief Factors, and Chief Traders, dated Fort Chipewyan, Dec. 5, 1823.

<sup>174</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1824-1825, B 39/e/8, p. 5.

<sup>175</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1825-1826, B 39/e/9, p. 44.

<sup>176</sup>Ibid.

<sup>177</sup>Fort Chipewyan Post Journals, 1831-1834, B 39/a/29, Oct. 15, 1834. This figure cannot be taken as anything more than approximate.



George Simpson's evaluation of the district as being one still productive of furs is borne out by an examination of the returns after 1821.



TABLE V<sup>178</sup>

## Returns

<u>Outfit</u>	<u>Ft. Chipewyan</u>	<u>G.S.L.</u>	<u>Peace River</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>Approximate Value</u>
1821	68	47	68	183	£10,980
1822	61	42	72	176	£10,560
1823	50	31	90	171	£10,260
1824	42	21	68	131	£7,860
1825	47 1/3	45 1/3	72 1/5	165	£9,900
TOTAL	268	186	371	826	£49,560
AVERAGE	53 3/8	37	74	165	£9,912

<sup>178</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1825-1826, B 39/e/9, p. 44. The approximate values are merely estimates. Cf. Appendix A. The returns for each post are given in number of packs.

TABLE VI<sup>179</sup>

<u>Outfit</u>	<u>Ft. Chipewyan</u>	<u>G.S.L.</u>	<u>Peace River</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>Approximate Value</u>
1826		not available			
1827	65	57	76	198	£11,880
1828	63	55	81	199	£11,940
1829	-	-	96	-	-
1830		not available			
1831	75	34	53	162	£9,720
1832	87	43	87	217	£13,020
1833	84	72	87	243	£14,580

<sup>179</sup>Compiled from Fort Chipewyan Post Journals, 1827-1828, B 39/a/26, 1828-1829, B 39/a/27, 1831-1832, B 39/a/28, 1831-1834, B 39/a/29.

Table VI is not as accurate as Table V because the former table is taken from James Keith's accounts; Table VI is taken from the daily journals which were not definite accountings.





According to William Brown the furs taken by the North West Company prior to 1821 varied between seventy and 115 packs. Table IV confirms his estimate since the Mackenzie River returns are included in these totals.<sup>180</sup> Therefore the district returned to a production not much below that before 1821.

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<sup>180</sup> Simpson estimated Mackenzie River returns between 80 and 100 packs. E. E. Rich (ed.), Simpson's Athabasca Journal, p. 393.



TABLE VII<sup>181</sup>

## BEAVER RETURNS FOR NORTHERN DEPARTMENT

Outfit	'21	'22	'23	'24	'25	'26	'27	'28	'29	'30	'31	'32	'33	'34	'35
Athabasca	8,126	7,934	7,726	5,479	6,043	5,072	5,166	7,090	6,014	7,009	6,711	5,679	5,160	5,542	2,916
Western Caledonia (Columbia)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Lesser Slave Lake	1,929	2,657	4,257	2,336	774	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Saskatchewan	2,924	2,834	3,543	3,286	6,543	5,934	6,116	9,384	7,447	5,177	6,969	4,961	4,309	4,604	2,675
Bow River	-	1,292	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ft. Assiniboine	-	-	-	871	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
English River	1,915	1,649	1,757	1,201	1,067	541	637	1,125	1,676	1,702	2,237	1,591	1,710	1,385	952
Cumberland	391	434	272	303	397	270	254	354	468	689	574	617	572	1,074	568
Swan River	583	497	523	644	432	167	246	281	381	697	421	488	376	475	439
Upper Red River	45	197	140	-	-	-	-	60	107	127	160	13	12	-	-
Lower Red River	93	126	30	37	80	64	7	147	45	126	158	84	59	92	99
Winnipeg	179	57	44	123	76	270	379	211	225	436	687	-	-	-	-
Lac la Pluie	652	502	826	735	501	727	666	598	565	725	448	735	666	504	359
Norway House	145	169	138	7	26	58	30	18	43	115	329	303	269	347	323
Nelson River	1,885	1,441	794	1,033	702	99	510	866	1,078	1,608	784	707	640	752	804
Island Lake	697	577	352	187	157	336	335	599	421	566	361	534	33	192	620
Oxford	-	-	-	-	-	-	118	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Severn	598	640	660	368	216	101	292	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
York Factory	471	331	504	370	295	9	2	376	484	376	315	535	357	287	545
Churchill	1,101	815	447	317	344	354	44	717	1,577	2,040	485	1,258	1,513	2,111	968
Private Traders & Adventurers	82	-	-	182	86	100	113	52	26	-	-	-	-	-	-
MacKenzie River	3,314	4,284	3,273	3,343	3,134	3,505	4,846	5,348	4,914	4,608	3,977	4,219	4,968	5,536	3,203
TOTAL	25,130	26,436	25,286	20,822	20,873	17,607	19,761	27,226	25,471	26,001	24,616	21,724	20,644	22,901	14,471



Table VII shows the beaver returns for the years 1821-1835. The returns for outfits 1821-1823 were quite steady. James Keith was satisfied with the 1823 returns since there was an increase in beaver taken from Mackenzie River.<sup>182</sup> He did note, however, that the 1823 outfit decreased "in value of about 10 p ct of the Returns of Outfit of 1822."<sup>183</sup> The slight drop in beaver for 1823 was caused by the failure of more than twenty of the best hunters of Great Slave Lake to make an appearance. The trade at Great Slave Lake was also disturbed by battles between two Mackenzie River tribes.<sup>184</sup> The massacre of the traders at Fort St. John's in the autumn of 1823 also had an effect upon the trade returns.<sup>185</sup> The decrease in the packs collected at Fort Chipewyan Indians to Fort Vermilion. The trade of these hunters had amounted to twenty-three packs in previous years.<sup>186</sup>

Table VII shows that the 1824 beaver returns dropped sharply. James Keith provided a comparison of the Athabaska posts in his report, from which Table VIII has been compiled.

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<sup>182</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1823-1824, B 39/e/6, p. 6.

<sup>183</sup>Ibid.

<sup>184</sup>Ibid.

<sup>185</sup>Ibid.

<sup>186</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1825-1826, B 39/e/9, p. 6.





TABLE VIII<sup>187</sup>

## Beaver Returns for Athabaska District Forts, 1823-1824

<u>Post</u>	<u>1823</u>	<u>1824</u>	<u>Increase or Decrease</u>
St. John's	1,055	-188	-1,055
Dunvegan	1,567	2,292	+ 725
Vermilion	2,575	1,291	-1,284
G.S. Lake	891	583	- 308
Chipewyan	1,740	1,367	- 373
TOTAL <sup>189</sup>	7,828	5,533	

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<sup>187</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1824-1825, B 39/e/8, p. 21.

<sup>188</sup>The St. John's post was closed in retaliation for the killings, as was Dunvegan. R. Fleming (ed.), Minutes of Northern Council, p. 104.

<sup>189</sup>Keith's totals differ from the ones in Table VII.

All posts except Dunvegan showed decreases. The decline at Fort Vermilion was attributed to the non-arrival of fourteen Chipewyans whose hunts in other years equalled the decrease.<sup>190</sup> The main reason for the smaller returns in 1824 was an outbreak of hostilities between the Beaver Indians of Peace River and the Chipewyans.<sup>191</sup> The hunting grounds of these two groups overlapped near the Chutes rapids on the Peace River. Keith's understanding was that these Indians had clashed several times in the past twenty-five years. The Beaver Indians, being the more aggressive, usually dominated the Chipewyans in these encounters. Thus

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<sup>190</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1824-1825, B 39/e/8, p. 21.

<sup>191</sup>Ibid., pp. 2-3.



the returns of the former were largely unaffected by these clashes, but the Chipewyan trade was "much affected and paralyzed [sic] thereby."<sup>192</sup>

Another reason for the smaller returns was the late arrival of the outfit (the brigades arrived at Fort Chipewyan on October 8). The worst effect of this late arrival occurred at Peace River and Great Slave Lake since the brigades did not reach either of these places by open water.<sup>193</sup> As a consequence, the Indians did not get away from the posts until after freeze-up.

The decrease in beaver, however, was offset by an increase in marten prices: "... a pack of the last of which (commencing with the sales for 1823) will more than double one composed of the former."<sup>194</sup>

Keith summarized the problems of management in his 1824-1825 report:

They are partly to be traced to the Declining & exhausted state of these Parts - the non-establishment of the R. M. [Rocky Mountain Portage] ... no regular supplies for the Copper Indians usually attracted to Great Sl. Lake, the ferment & apprehension first excited among the natives by the murders at St. Johns ... and aggravated by the late collision between the Chipewyan Indians ... though the prime cause in my opinion is the late supplies in autumn which renders it impossible for the Indians to get in time to their respective hunting grounds....<sup>195</sup>

<sup>192</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1825-1826, B 39/e/9, p. 6.

<sup>193</sup>Ibid.

<sup>194</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>195</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1824-1825, B 39/e/8, p. 11. The late arrivals of brigades was occasioned by the recent introduction of boats and the experimentation with a different route. See E. Rich (ed.), Simpson's Athabasca Journal, pp. xxxvi, ff.



At the close of his stay at Fort Chipewyan he concluded that these factors, apart from depleted fur regions, were equally important in being reasons for the reduced returns, hence, he could not "furnish ... conclusive Criterion whereby to Judge of the actually existing Resources of the District ..."<sup>196</sup> He recommended closer attention be paid to costs and conservation in place of the old maxim of making returns with little consideration given to the costs of production.<sup>197</sup> Keith's close attention to detail in management is evidenced by the careful accounts he kept at Fort Chipewyan. His comparison of the expenses of boat and canoe transportation from York Factory to Mackenzie River was probably appreciated by George Simpson. Efficiency in management was realized in 1826 with an increase in returns and a profit of £13,000.<sup>198</sup> In all likelihood, part of this profit was due to the new system of trade methods which Keith introduced.<sup>199</sup>

The damaging effects of competition and the problems of transportation were thus solved by a combination of sound management and stable conditions of monopoly. Much of this success was due to the abilities of James Keith.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>196</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1825-1826, B 39/e/9, p. 18.

<sup>197</sup>Ibid.

<sup>198</sup>R. Fleming (ed.), Minutes of Northern Council, p. lxi.

<sup>199</sup>E. Rich, History, vol. 2, p. 475. Supra, Chapter 5, pp. 31-33.

<sup>200</sup>For a brief biographical sketch see E. Rich (ed.), Simpson's Athabasca Journal, Appendix B, p. 444.





## CONCLUSION

The years from 1778 to 1835 saw the fur trade firmly established in the Athabaska. Its operations were directed from Fort Chipewyan. The problems encountered have been discussed in the foregoing chapters.

The problem of finding a suitable route to Lake Athabaska was related to those of transportation and provisioning. The provisions forts along Peace River were prerequisite to a successful transportation system. The abundant fisheries at Fort Chipewyan provided a cheap source of food for the extra men required for the brigades. There was an urgency in the movement of furs and trade goods each year because the season of open navigation differed for each northern river and lake. The problem was partially solved with the introduction of a double boat brigade system in the early 1820s.

The study shows that life was exacting and laborious for the engagés. They worked hard and, when time permitted, they played hard. The officer class enjoyed more leisure; consequently they lived better and longer. Although more research is required on the health and living conditions of the men, the records seem to indicate that the engagés were physically spent at a younger age than the officers.

The thesis attempts to demonstrate the relationship between the Chipewyan way of life and the methods of trade which were devised to exploit that culture. The Cree Indians were of a different disposition. Employed mainly as fort hunters, they traded provisions for liquor and were addicted to its use.



The study, in dealing with the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company periods, reveals that the chief difference was in efficient management. Part of this difference can be attributed to the character and policies of the two companies. The North West spirit, exemplified in men like Archibald N. McLeod, the "Athabaska justice", and Samuel Black, was flamboyant and ruthless. The attitude of the Hudson's Bay Company, until the final conflict, was that of a company holding a government charter, cautiously and carefully pursuing its trade according to accepted London business practices.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless it was Colin Robertson, describing himself as more ostentatious and extravagant than any Hudson's Bay officer,<sup>2</sup> who directed the Hudson's Bay Company campaign against the North West stronghold in the Athabaska. He employed tactics similar to the Northwesters', but even more efficiently and persistently, and the result was the collapse of their Athabaska empire.

The organization of George Simpson after 1821, assisted by capable men like James Keith, resulted in the renewal of the Athabaska as a source of rich profits.

There is an even more important reason for the difference between the two periods. Prior to 1821 the district was disturbed by alternating times of monopoly and competition. In dealing with the Indians, monopoly seemed to be the best, if not the only condition.<sup>3</sup> Only from

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<sup>1</sup>E. Rich (ed.), Robertson's Letters, pp. xxxviii, lxxvii.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>3</sup>E. Rich (ed.), "Trade Habits", p. 53. Supra Chapter 5.





1788 to 1798, and from 1806 to 1814 did the North West Company enjoy the fruits of monopoly at Fort Chipewyan. All of the difficulties in managing the trade had not been solved in 1798.<sup>4</sup> In the period from 1806 to 1814 the North West Company was occupied with greater difficulties than devising an efficient system for the Athabaska trade.<sup>5</sup>

Competition was the foe of a successful trade. The Indians became indolent when presented with the extravagant gifts of rival companies. The traders became accustomed to violence after the severe conflict of the Canadian companies in the 1800s. The North West Company's methods of violence<sup>6</sup> culminated in the 1815-1821 conflict. Only when monopoly was re-established was the trade able to prosper.

In 1835 Fort Chipewyan was still the headquarters for the Athabaska district, a position which was held until further improvements in transportation bypassed it. Until these improvements occurred the water highways of the Canadian northwest led to Fort Chipewyan.

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<sup>4</sup>For example, the location of the fort. Supra Chapter 2.

<sup>5</sup>Its financial position was weak; the War of 1812 had cut off markets and sources of supply and dissension was growing between the agents and wintering partners. E. Rich (ed.), Robertson's Letters, pp. lx-lxi.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. xxiv. Supra Chapter 4.





## APPENDIX A

### THE VALUE OF FUR PACKS

The basic unit for determining fur values is the pack.<sup>1</sup> A pack's average weight was ninety pounds; its value depended upon the type and variety of furs it contained, and the current price of furs. In 1800 James Mackenzie gave the contents of a fur pack as "44 Beaver Skins, 12 Otters, 5 Bears & 6 pichous (fishers)".<sup>2</sup> The beaver skins are packed pelt to pelt, hide to hide to prevent damage to the hair. The number of beaver skins in a pack depended on the season in which the animals were trapped. Mr. Baergen has evidence to show that fine beaver averaged  $1\frac{1}{4}$  pounds a skin and common beaver averaged  $1\frac{1}{3}$  pounds a pelt. The slight variation in weight indicates that the terms "fine" and "common" probably referred to the grades of fur commonly known as parchment and coat beaver. Fall beaver pelts are much lighter than those trapped in the spring. Fifty good beaver skins weigh approximately eighty pounds, an average of  $1\frac{3}{5}$  pounds each. Spring beaver pelts are much heavier; fifty good beaver skins weigh about 125 pounds, an average of  $2\frac{1}{2}$  pounds each. Thus a pack probably contained between

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<sup>1</sup>For an excellent account of the value of furs and packs see W. Baergen, "The Fur Trade At Lesser Slave Lake, 1815-1831," M.A. thesis, University of Alberta, May, 1967. It is necessary to point out, however, that beaver sold by weight, not by pelt, as Mr. Baergen states.

<sup>2</sup>Journal of James Mackenzie, P.A.C., April 8, 1800.



thirty-five to sixty pelts.<sup>3</sup> The outside of the packs were covered with less valuable skins such as summer beaver or moose hide.<sup>4</sup>

The price of parchment beaver went up from 19s.9d. in 1784<sup>5</sup> to 31s. in 1819.<sup>6</sup> In 1824 the price was 36s.1d.<sup>7</sup> and in 1837 the price was approximately 31s.<sup>8</sup> The rise in price per pound of beaver meant that pack values also increased. Around 1790 a pack of fur was estimated at £40.<sup>9</sup> In 1801, 148 packs from Upper English River were worth £4,581, or about £30 per pack.<sup>10</sup> In 1810, packs from north of Lake Winnipeg were worth £50 each, while Saskatchewan packs were £30 each. Northern fur was usually worth more than that obtained in southern regions.<sup>11</sup>

The sources for the above information on the value of packs did not, however, state whether these values were gross or net profit. Using

<sup>3</sup>I am indebted to Mr. Paul Kelpin, Hudson's Bay Company manager at Fort Chipewyan, for the information on grades and weight of beaver.

<sup>4</sup>A. S. Morton, History, p. 355.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>E. E. Rich (ed.), Robertson's Letters, p. 89n.

<sup>7</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1825-1826, B 39/e/9, p. 42.

<sup>8</sup>H. A. Innis, The Fur Trade, p. 318.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 240n.

<sup>10</sup>E. Coues, New Light, vol. 1, p. 283.

<sup>11</sup>G. C. Davidson, op. cit., p. 206n.



the above weight of beaver, and taking the price of beaver to be approximately £1 sterling per pound, a pack's gross value would be between £80 and £100. In 1825, forty-two packs of fur were valued at £3,887.3.8 at Fort Chipewyan, an average of £92.10.1 per pack.<sup>12</sup> In 1826, the value of 47 1/3 packs was £4,159.10.9, or about £88 a pack.<sup>13</sup> Beaver, marten, and muskrat were the main furs taken in these years.

In 1824, George Simpson estimated the profit of a fur pack from the Columbia district at £60.<sup>14</sup> His estimates of the New Caledonia district packs were approximately £12,000 for 130 packs of furs or £92 a pack, and, less £3,000 for expenses, a profit of £9,000, or £69 a pack.<sup>15</sup> The Mackenzie River returns were estimated at 180 packs at a value of £13,000 or approximately £72 per pack.<sup>16</sup> Simpson did not say whether these figures were gross value or net profit. They were probably gross value because James Keith, in 1823, stated the pack value of Mackenzie River to be worth £63.7.3; a New Caledonia pack was worth £57.4.8, and Athabaska packs (Fort Chipewyan) were valued at £64.7.4 each.<sup>17</sup> In 1825, Keith gave the following estimate of a pack as:

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<sup>12</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1825-1826, B 39/e/9, p. 42.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>F. Merk, Fur Trade and Empire, p. 70.

<sup>15</sup>Simpson's 1828 Journey, pp. 24-25.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1823-1824, B 39/e/6, p. 15.





... averaging £74 of which the actual cost would be nearly 11 p Cent would produce £66 clear gain.<sup>18</sup>

The percentage of cost provides an interesting comparison with the cost of producing a pack in New Caledonia which, by the above figures, was about twenty-five per cent.

The above information, then, give reason to set an approximate pack value at £60 in the period of study for this thesis.

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<sup>18</sup>Fort Chipewyan Report on District, 1824-1825, B 39/e/8, p. 5.





Fort Chipewyan, 1889  
A. V. Mercredi Sketch



Chief Factor's Residence, and Warehouse  
Fort Chipewyan, August, 1964  
Monument to Right





Fort Chipewyan, 1964  
Looking West; Site is  
Right Bottom.  
Pointe du Sable is Left Center.



The "Rock", Fort Chipewyan  
Monument is Center.







Fort Chipewyan; Looking South.  
Potato Island at Top.



Fort Wedderburn Site.  
Potato Island.





English Island  
Nottingham House Site  
Located Left Bottom (S.E.)



Roman Catholic Mission  
Fort Chipewyan  
Little Island is Left Top.



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